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# KUNAPIPI

VOLUME II NUMBER 2  
1980

# Kunapipi

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*Kunapipi* refers to the Australian aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol both of creativity and regeneration. The journal's emblem is to be found on an aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory in Australia.

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# Kunapipi

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VOLUME II NUMBER 2

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The journal is the bulletin for the European branch of the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies. As such it offers information about courses, conferences, visiting scholars and writers, scholarships, and literary competitions.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with footnotes gathered at the end, should conform to the MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) Style Sheet and should be accompanied by a return envelope.

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## Mrs Murphy

The thing that puzzled Mrs Murphy as she sat in the dining room — the front room was kept for best and it meant rearranging all the covers on the couches, besides the dining room was nicer, more comfy, and accepted a cup of tea from Mr Murphy

'The usual, dear?'

'Please, dear.'

'Oh' sweet-tooth.'

nice with the kids in bed and the house quiet at last — was why she had married Mr Murphy in the first place. She always called him that except in their most intimate moments and they were few enough and even then it was mostly 'Oh Mr Murphy'. 'Mr Murphy' came from her mother in their courting days when he'd be coming up the path and her mother would call from the front window here's that dark fellow Mr Murphy after you again. There must have been some reason for marrying him, though for the life of her she couldn't recall it quite now.

The other girls had laughed at her at first, saying it wasn't right to be calling your sweetheart by his family name, leave alone Mister, when he had a perfectly good name of his own to be going by, Arthur. She still had trouble with the forms sometimes where it said 'name of head of household, surname, other names', and what other name would a decent man be going by, Mr Murphy? Her friends had got used to it in time, and only occasionally sniggered behind her back, and did they think she didn't notice, when their hearts were hard against their own men, about the private relations between Polly McQueen, as was, and her Mr Murphy, and little enough she saw of them now and didn't she have enough to keep her hands busy and her mind out of mischief what with five young ones to worry over, and did they think that they came, bless her name, by Immaculate Conception? It showed a proper respect, the Father had said, a proper respect Mrs Murphy, and the young things nowadays with their skirts about their waists and its Johnny this and Jimmy-that, no sooner did they meet a boy and all eyes and will you be at the dance on Sunday? Well her own girls

'Seen the paper, dear?'

'Thank you, Mr Murphy. I have my darning.'

would learn to show more respect, a little more common decency. No, it wasn't her girls she was worried about, they were growing, the whole parish said it, the Murphy girls, into proper young ladies, and a pity there aren't more like them about. Why did you see little Maureen, what's her name, the mother with the unnatural hair and no husband, that's it, Petersham as she calls it, at mass on Sunday with herself all dolled up and her face all painted and making eyes, the little miss, on the way back from communion and no respect for the Host. It's a wonder the Father doesn't speak to her mother, though enough the poor man's got on his plate already what with his ulcers and the Church Fund. No, the girls were all right, she'd see to that. It was the boy that worried her, not that he wasn't loving enough or willing and the Sisters all said he was the smartest boy in the school though wilful at times, they'd soon train that out of him. But it was secretive somehow not in a dishonest way but close and not saying much, you never knew what he was thinking Mrs Fitzgerald said, just watching, and obedient when you asked him but the way he'd watch you. Comes from having too many women about Mrs Watson said and her with five girls already and always hoping for a boy as if it isn't trying enough for the poor woman with him off drinking, at least Mr Murphy had the pledge, thank the Lord there's little to go round as it is, and coming home all hours with his friends even worse, tramping their oaths through a Christian house and her sick with all those little ones.

'I'll send some soup round to Mrs Watson in the morning.'

'Hmph.'

No, it was the boy worried her. He got too much inside himself. It's not good all that rummacking about inside your own head, and reading, and him to the library three times this week already, books are all right in their own way there's value in books her own father would say and him never read one in his whole life, value in books, but you need to get out once in a while. He needs to get out in the fresh air and play with other children more, even when he's out it's playing by himself his own games and that silly scoring game he plays with his rag football, sounded like the radio going as she came up the street the other day Mrs Watson said, playing both sides in the Grand Final and who'll win in the last quarter and Mrs White shaking her head over the fence, if that football goes in my roses again I'll keep it and what would she do, the boy said, sixty and with a football.

'Mr Murphy?'

'More tea, dear?'

'That boy. He'll have to get out in the air more.'

Not that Mr Murphy himself didn't spend time with the boy, she couldn't complain that way, though he was tired home from work but a boy needs boys of his own age. Even if it is his father.

'He needs other lads to play with', said Mr Murphy.

She remembered some of the lads, though they were grown men by then, that Mr Murphy would, what was the word he used, knock with when he was courting. That awful fellow with the red hair and pimples where he didn't have freckles, always loud and interrupting their walks when her father would let her go out on a Sunday after the dishes, what was his name?

'Paddy O'Brien', said Mr Murphy

That's it and drinking often into the bargain though where he got it on a Sunday.

'Special mate of mine', said Mr Murphy. 'And Liam and James with the club-foot, could never keep up and we'd have to help him over the fences when he went pinching apples from Maguires. Do you remember Paddy? You must.'

Mr Murphy settled the newspaper around his knees. 'Ah, those were the days', as if they were, and never again, and watched in the fire the club foot boy with the arse out of his britches leap the fence as though he'd never had a bad day's walking and old Maguire two yards behind yelling with his arms pulled out by his labrador with a grin as wide as the chookhouse that was their own special pet and hadn't had such fun since Mrs Maguire got her leg caught in one of Mr Maguire's traps and her shouting at the dog to fetch the old idiot as had crippled her and the dog supposing that Mrs Maguire was a sport after all and going down on his front paws with his tongue in the dust and waiting for the stick he had to fetch.

'Those were the days', said Mr Murphy, picking up his newspaper again.

Did she remember Paddy O'Brien, hah, and James so sweet with his affliction and all the girls mad for him and seeking him out special to take to the church dance but only because he was a club-foot and didn't dance and all the other boys would crowd around and spend half the night persuading him to give it a try, which he never would but always say dance with Peggy or Maureen as they brought him and wouldn't get a dance otherwise — and got every dance. And Liam Patrick, she could have married him, Carmel Patrick, Carmel Mary Patrick, if only he'd

asked her but didn't. And went to war and was killed.

And would he have married her after feeling her that night behind the church wall, such thoughts dear Mary drive me pure. She looked up quickly.

'Damn sentiment and romance', Mr Murphy angrily turned a page. 'The papers is full of it nowadays. Naked women next thing we know.' He was always going on about 'damn sentiment and romance' since the Father had forbid them to read the picture papers though he never damned it so satisfactorily as Mr Murphy.

But Liam was quick with a softness in him that wasn't for war. Not saying much and never the leader but a smiley face as if he knew a secret that they'd all end up in the bad but went along anyway for the company. Where would she be now if he'd lived and asked her and she'd said yes as she would and not a second's thought? It was hard to tell but not darning Mr Murphy's socks and him beginning to doze and soon he'd be snoring and waking each few minutes to tell her he was only dozing as if she cared if he really slept and what was there to keep a vigil over the mending of his socks?

Mr Murphy's chin hit his chest and he snapped awake. 'Only dozing dear', he reassured her.

'Dozing, huh', said Mrs Murphy. 'snoring soundly more's the like. And me with a pile of mending to go through and much's the company I get.' Mr Murphy began to snore.

Her own boy was a bit like Liam, not so soft, the hardness grew in him, but quick and something of the secret in him. The way you'd suddenly turn from the ironing with nothing said between you in the kitchen and catch him smiling and you'd ask what's tickling your fancy and he'd say 'nothing' and go straight on smiling, not nasty like somebody laughing when you weren't looking, and not offensive, so you wouldn't ask anymore. There was none of that in Mr Murphy.

'Dozing m'dear', without bothering to wake up.

A good enough man, as gentle as he could be, but dull, yes, she'd have to say dull if all had their dues, with his bald pate dropping towards his knees and his weak chin and the dandruff on his collar, where had that come from, she hadn't seen that before, if he had no hair? And Liam's hair was like her son's, brown like honey in the sun and curling when it was washed which was every Saturday after his bath and hung about his ears where you could kiss the sweet pink whorls of his skin, if he let you, and soft and fair like a new-fruited peach where no worm had got in...

'Mr Murphy', she said quickly, knowing as she said it that she had

married him because he'd asked her.

'Doing, m'dear', recorded Mr Murphy.

'It's late and I've done all the darning I'll do tonight. It's time we took our rightful ease, Arthur.'

Mr Murphy hurled his paper to the floor and headed for the bedroom. 'Don't be long, love', he called over his shoulder.

Mrs Murphy smiled and knelt to pile the ashes in the back of the grate. Ah, Liam. She crossed herself. Well, the Lord would forgive her, her sins were little enough. And the boy, the whole parish said it, needed a brother.

ANNA RUTHERFORD

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## In Spite of Dungeon, Fire, and Sword: a Personal Account

This is a slightly revised version of a talk I gave at a seminar on Australian Literature held some time ago at Stirling University, Scotland. Several things prompted me to give such a talk. I had recently been home and whilst there had seen Ron Blair's play *The Christian Brothers*. I had on my return to London seen Mary McCarthy's play, *Once a Catholic* and the film *The Devil's Playground*. Then in Aarhus I had been teaching *The Merry-go-round in the Sea*. I remembered the passage where Rob is discussing with his mother and aunt:

Blood, the boy was thinking. Blood was mysterious.

'Have I got any nigger blood?' he asked.

'Of course not,' his grandmother said, shocked.

'Have I got any convict blood?'

'Certainly not,' said his grandmother.

'If I had convict blood and nigger blood,' the boy said, thinking it out, 'I'd be related to just about everyone in Australia.'

'No,' said Aunt Kay, gravely. 'You wouldn't be related to any Italian fishermen, or any Greek tomato-gardeners.'

'Or any Bog Irish Catholics,' said Mrs Maplesoad.

'Uncle Paul's a Catholic.'

'That's quite different,' said Mrs Maplesoad.

I asked Mick (Randolph Stow) why uncle Paul was different and he told me it was because he was a Maltese marquis. I can't lay claim to any Maltese marquis but I can to the bog Irish. So when Alastair Niven, who was organizing the seminar, asked me to speak I decided I would try to pay tribute to the bog Irish and the men and women who staffed their schools.

My first conscious memory of religion dates back to when I was visiting my relatives 'up the bush'. 'Up the bush' was, and still is, a very small village called Carroll, approximately 12 miles from Gunnedah. The Bradys, my relatives, had come from Ireland at the end of the 1840s, had worked first of all in the Murrurundi area and then in the early 1850s had crossed the Great Dividing Range by bullock dray to settle eventually in Carroll where they became small farmers — very small farmers. Some of them are still there.

When I first knew Carroll it had only three public buildings: the public school, the Church of England, and the Catholic church. The priest used to come from Gunnedah once a month to say Mass and the local Catholic population used to drive up in their buggies and sulkies.

On this particular visit it was announced that there was to be a mission. In answer to my query, 'What is a mission?' I was told that it meant that the priest would come for a whole week, that there would be Mass and a sermon every day during that week, that this was a great privilege and that I must be very good so that I could get the grace of the mission. I have no memory of what the priest said or indeed of anything else about that mission except for one thing. And that was that at the end of Mass each morning and the sermon in the evening everyone stood up and sang with great fervour, indeed with a gusto that would do justice to any non-conformist revivalist meeting this special hymn. It was always the same hymn, 'Faith of Our Fathers'.

*Faith of our fathers, living still  
In spite of dungeon, fire, and sword;  
Oh, how our hearts beat high with joy  
When'er we hear that glorious word!*

Faith of our fathers! Holy Faith!  
We will be true to thee till death.

Our fathers, chained in prison dark,  
Were still in heart and conscience free  
How sweet would be their children's face,  
If they, like them, could die for thee!  
Faith of our fathers! Holy Faith!  
We will be true to thee till death.

As you can see, it is far more of a battle-cry than a hymn and I loved it. I imagined myself chained in some dark prison dying for the faith, a vision that was to change when I began school and the prison was replaced by the Roman Colosseum and I waited for the lions to eat me. For the first time I became conscious of 'them' and 'us': we were a persecuted group, and we must be ready to suffer, fight and if necessary die for 'the one, true faith'.



The village of Carroll, New South Wales

As the pictures below indicate, the division existed not only in life but also in death.



Pictures of a cemetery from a town on the mid-North Coast of New South Wales. The one on the left is taken from the Church of England section looking across to the Catholic section. Each section is signposted so that there can be no danger of straying into the wrong region.



To understand this Catholic/Protestant conflict one must take certain social/historical events into account. The historians have pointed out that early Australian census returns do not record the national ancestry of citizens but they do record their religion. The figures for 1831 show that nearly  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the population was Catholic. And in early Australia one must realize that 'Catholic' implied 'convict or emancipist', but most of all it implied 'Irish'. This situation was not to change until after 1945. The body of professing Catholics in Australia was, until the large-scale immigration after World War II, probably approximately equal to, though not identical with, the body of people of Irish descent.

The social, political and economic conditions in Ireland which had helped to create the convicts also helped to swell the ranks of immigrants, and the figures show that over 50% of the assisted immigrants to Australia before 1851 were Irish. Almost without exception they were working class and in Australia became unskilled labourers. They brought with them a deep-rooted hatred of the English, a hatred which had been nourished over the centuries and which the conditions in Australia did nothing to alleviate. As Manning Clark has remarked, 'The wrongs of the Irish in New South Wales began to be added to their melancholy history in Ireland.' Perhaps I should add that the notion of the Irish in Australia being a persecuted group has been questioned, particularly by James Walderssee in his book *Catholic Society in New South Wales, 1798-1860*. He argues that the Irish Catholics were not nearly as badly done by as they believed or as their spokesmen have made out. The truth possibly lies somewhere between Manning Clark and Walderssee. But that is not really the point. What is important is that the militarism of Irish Catholicism was transferred to Australia and that until just recently Catholics in Australia were brought up with the belief that they were, and had been from the beginning, a persecuted group.

The other historical event of importance in this connection is the establishment of the Church schools. A. G. L. Shaw has outlined the situation. Schools in New South Wales were originally controlled by various religious denominations. In 1848 'national' schools were set up, mainly in sparsely populated areas where the religious schools were inadequate. The system of two boards allocating funds to two separate school systems proved unsatisfactory; a committee of enquiry in 1855 found that in both systems many schools were in need of repair, attendance was poor, discipline lax and teaching unsatisfactory. At this stage Henry Parkes entered the scene. One of Australia's most famous politicians, sometimes called the Father of Federation, he was revered by teachers and children in the

state schools as the man responsible for introducing an education system that was 'free, compulsory and secular'.

This, I might add, was not the image I grew up with. Here was the man responsible for our plight, for not only introducing a godless system, but a system that deprived us of our rights. We were taught by an old Irish nun and there were three subjects guaranteed to turn her attention from whatever she was teaching us: the potato famine, the Irish martyrs from the 1916 uprising in Dublin, and Sir Henry Parkes. The picture she gave of him was such that we weren't certain we hadn't strayed into the Christian doctrine class and were listening to a description of Satan himself.

The education issue was a bitter and violent one, which the secularists eventually won. In 1866 Parkes's government set up a separate council of education and refused government aid to new church schools which made the future expansion of church schools impossible. Rather than send their children to the godless state schools denounced by William Bede Vaughan, Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, as 'seedpots of immorality, infidelity and lawlessness' the Catholic hierarchy decided to establish their own schools whilst at the same time continuing their campaign for renewal of state aid (state justice was how we were taught to express it), a campaign that was not successful until the 1960s. To build and equip these schools they raised money from the Catholic population; to staff them they recruited nuns and brothers from Ireland. What resulted was to have far reaching and long-lasting effects. The result of the establishment of these schools was the creation of a dual education system — the State schools and the Catholic schools. There was actually a third group, the Protestant private school. Manning Clark sums up the situation:

The Protestant schools educated the sons and daughters of the bourgeoisie in the cities, of the merchants, bankers, traders, manufacturers, publicans, and professional men, the sons and daughters of the squatters and the wealthy farmers, together with a few talented children whom they bought with scholarships. Their schools were modelled on the English public schools and designed for the education of boys and girls to serve God in church, state, and the professions — to produce that upright man who feared God and eschewed evil and at the same time was dedicated to the service of the worldly aspiration of the British people.

By contrast the Catholics provided only a few schools for the children of the bourgeoisie, the squatters, and the professional classes because their numbers came from the petit bourgeoisie and the working classes.... In such schools priests, brothers, nuns, and laymen presented a view of man and the meaning of his life as well as a version of human history quite different from what was taught in the Protestant schools. The state schools taught a syllabus prescribed by the Colonial Department of Education. The Protestant and the state-school boy grew up to believe in the

contribution of the British to the freedom of men and the progress of the world; the Catholic boy grew up nursing in his mind the melancholy history of the Irish people and a conviction that the British by great barbarity and cruelty had contributed to the oppression and degradation of the ancestors of his people in Ireland.

Such schools made sure that the fear, suspicion and prejudice that had already divided the Catholic from the Protestant would be perpetuated for many years to come, in fact right up to the time when Ron Blair's play is set in the mid-1950s.

The suspicion, fear and hostility each felt for one another was to enter deep into the fabric of our society and imaginations. At the lowest level it was reflected in the slogans of abuse we hurled at one another on our way to and from school.

Proddle dogs will always yell  
When they feel the fires of hell.

Catholic, Catholic, ya, ya, ya,  
Ought to be, ought to be, dipped.

At a slightly more sophisticated level it was reflected in the advice Ron Blair's brother gives to his pupils preparing for public examinations.

While I'm talking about exams, there's something else I should mention. Next year is of course an external exam, probably the most important you'll ever sit. One tip. Don't put A.M.D.G. or J.M.J. at the top of your page – anything that will give you away as a Catholic. And if you do a history question and you have to mention the pope, don't on any account refer to him as the holy father. That's a dead give-away. I heard of one boy who did a lot of damage when he did the question on the unification of Italy. He said that Napoleon III was a heretic who was no doubt this minute burning in hell.

(Pause)

Now that may very well be true. But a public examination with Protestant and Mason examiners is no place to say it. You're more use to God with your Leaving Certificate than back here for another year. Boys, some of those examiners are terribly bigoted people and they'd like nothing better than to make the going tough for a Catholic lad. Nothing frightens them more than to see the professions filling with Catholics. Boys and girls pouring out of the colleges and convents, and taking positions of responsibility in the professions and the Public Service ... positions their kids aren't bright enough to win. If you have to refer to the pope – although my advice is to skip the question altogether – it's my guess it's a question put in to trap the unwary – call him the pope. And refer to Catholics as Roman Catholics and occasionally papists. Then they'll never guess!

In an introduction to Ron Blair's play *Edmund Campion* describes the schools and the sacrifices of the Catholic community:

The schools were rickety, unpainted, crowded buildings.... To build (them) and keep them open, the Catholic working class had to scrape every penny from its own resources. Every one of them believed that the community should help support their schools; and every one of them resented with a sullen, deep, unnoticed anger the refusal of the community to help. They did not enjoy the alienation of being second-class citizens.

This is a perfect description of the situation I grew up in. I came from Mayfield (it was many years before the irony of the name struck me), a working-class suburb in Newcastle, which in itself is an aggressively working-class city. Mayfield is surrounded by four hills; in my childhood the Catholic hospital stood on one, the Catholic orphanage on the second, the Redemptorist monastery on the third, and the Catholic church and convent on the fourth. At the foot of these hills lay The Commonwealth Steel Company, Lysaghts, Stewart and Lloyds and the Broken Hill Proprietary Company. Between them they represented the four largest heavy industries in Australia. I mention this to show that even in the 1940s and '50s Manning Clark's correlation between Catholic and working class still existed. With one exception the father of every child in my class worked as a labourer in one of the surrounding industries.

The first school I attended was a two-room weatherboard shed which was officially known as the Hanbury Street annex of St Columbanus's parish school but which was known to all and sundry as Snake Gully. Even given Catholic school conditions of the time it was bad. There were fairly large holes in the wooden floor which were ignored until Father McNamara tripped in one as he was saying Mass. The solution to the problem was the usual one. A raffle was organized and with the proceeds from this a piece of carpet was bought and placed in front of the altar. During school time the carpet was carefully rolled up and the altar was hidden by a large, dark red and very old velvet curtain.

We paid school money, 6d a week, increased to a shilling and then two shillings as we moved into secondary school and reduced in the case of large families. But even the sixpences and shillings dried up in times of strikes and they were frequent in those years. I can remember all the industries closing down when the miners on the northern coalfields went on strike because the pit ponies had bad breath.

Some tried to outwit the opposition and get something out of 'them'. The most ingenious instance I can remember occurred when I was in

fifth class. It was first day of the year and the nun was calling the roll. She came eventually to the name of a boy who was one of a family of seven and whose parents were staunch Catholics. She called his name and there was no reply. Another pupil then volunteered the information that all seven children had gone to the 'publics'. He might as well have announced that Archbishop Mannix had joined the Royal Empire Society. A second child then informed the teacher that the mum of the defectors had told his mum that they'd all be back when 'they'd got what they could'. In a week's time they returned armed with the exercise books, pens, pencils, rulers etc. that were supplied free to the children in the state schools but which the Catholic school parents had to buy.

But cases like this were rare. Generally it was up to us to find ways of raising money. We'd hold sugar days when each child was expected to bring a cup of sugar. This was then handed on to one or two children whose mothers had volunteered to make toffees which would in turn be sold for a penny and the proceeds used to buy some small item, perhaps a reference book for the library or a new bladder for the basketball. The children, as well as the parents, pulled their weight. We'd hold backyard concerts at the weekends. Our mothers would bake cakes and make toffees for us to sell and we'd charge 3d admission. It didn't matter that members of the audience were also usually performers. The star item in my day was a song and tap dance routine in which a boy and girl dressed in Dutch outfit sang and danced 'I'm a little Dutch girl'.

But the chief source of income was gambling. Raffles were as much a part of our life as prayers. A box of chocolates that one of the nuns received from a visitor was promptly turned into first prize in a penny raffle. Added to the week's rituals of confession, benediction, Mass, was one more — housie. We could all of us recite the litany of housie (bingo) legs eleven — one one; the devil's own — thirteen; clickety-click — sixty-six, with as much ease as we could the Litany of the Saints.

A major money raiser was the school fête. Whether we would have a record player or a new set of text books the following year depended on the success of the fête, and the success of the fête depended on the weather. Prayers were offered up each morning for a fine day and usually they were answered. I can however remember a couple of occasions when it threatened to rain. The procedure was always the same. First of all Sister Chanel saw to it that the statue of St Joseph was taken outside and placed on the lawn in front of the convent with an umbrella over him — just in case. Then, if things continued to look grim we would be marched off to the convent chapel to offer up prayers to St Jude, the hope of the hopeless.

The division between 'them' and 'us' was also reflected in our school rituals. In the state school the ritual took place on Monday morning where in front of the assembled school the flag was raised, the children chanted

I honour my God  
I serve my King  
I salute my flag.

and then sang God Save the King.

For us the ritual took place on Fridays when we were all marched off, class after class to confession which was followed at noon by Benediction at which we sang *O Salutaris* and *Tantum Ergo*.

Devotion to your religion meant devotion to Ireland. The two were synonymous. The more Irish you could appear the more likely were you to find grace in the eyes of God and the nuns. I went through a terrible period of feeling embarrassed about my name. In the midst of all the Connollys, Bradys, Ryans and O'Dwyers there was I stuck with Rutherford. Not only was it not Irish, but I was constantly being reminded by my school companions that one of the same name had founded the Jehovah's Witnesses. If only my parents could have baptized me Colleen or Therese to show that their heart was in the right place even if their name wasn't. But no, they couldn't even make that concession. And what's more, they didn't even make it Anne which name I could find amongst the list of saints. Oh no. They had to settle upon a slightly foreign version and I had to convince myself that it was a slight variant of the real thing. My situation was eased somewhat when another girl joined the class and she was called Jeanette McMurtrie. Anna Rutherford was bad enough, but Jeanette McMurtrie was quite beyond the pale. And that wasn't all. The poor girl had even more to live down. My father had 'changed' ('turned' was how the 'others' put it), but her father remained a Protestant.

All of this meant that Empire Day played no part in our lives. For us the one day of the year was St Patrick's day. For weeks before we not only practised for the St Patrick Night's concert but we also spent much of our time making shamrocks and harps to present to our favourite teachers on the day itself. These ranged from simple shamrocks cut out of green cardboard — an added sophistication was to spray them with silver tinsel — to very sophisticated Irish harps with gold thread for the strings and sequins where the thread was attached to the harp. On St Patrick's day you'd think that whole fields of shamrocks had become animated as you

saw the most popular nuns moving about bedecked in 20 to 30 shamrocks and harps. The culmination of the day was the concert in the Town Hall. This was attended by the Bishop of Maitland himself. He was an imposing figure and as he entered the hall the whole audience stood up and sang 'Hail Glorious St Patrick'.



A convent school girl

All of this not only divided our society, it also bred in the Catholic minority a deep resentment. But over and above the resentment it created a determination not only to survive but to win. One way of proving superiority was on the playing field – no matches were more fiercely contested than those between Protestant and Catholic. There was another event that occurred each year and that gave us a further

opportunity to show 'them'. This was the Health Week March in which the pupils of both Catholic and State schools marched down Hunter Street, the main street of Newcastle. For weeks and weeks before the event we marched in fours around the paddock adjacent to the school to the accompaniment of orders shouted by Sister Helena who beat an old tin drum to keep us in step. When we were deemed respectable enough to be seen by outsiders Gladys King's father was called in. He was a sergeant in the air force and it was his task to bring us to perfection. Along with Sergeant King came a boy and a real drum, both on loan from the Marist Brothers. For the next two weeks we marched each day around the block on which the church, convent and school stood. And as we swung from Church Street into Crebert Street we could see the nuns standing on the edge of the convent grounds eyes trained on us (they were an enclosed order and not able to accompany us outside the convent grounds). As we reached the point where they were standing Sergeant King bellowed out 'Eyes Right'. Let me assure you that no group of Field Marshalls could have been more exacting than those Dominican nuns as they took the salute, and no group of King's guards could have been more anxious to please.

When I think back on it I believe that our yearly efforts for Health Week were more than a gesture of defiance. They were also a gesture of reassurance to let 'them' know that even if we didn't raise the flag each Monday morning, even though we celebrated St Patrick's Day and not Empire Day, and even though our fathers refused to attend the protestant Dawn Service on Anzac Day, we could still be relied upon, if necessary, to cling just as desperately to the hills of Gallipoli as our fathers and grandfathers had done before us.

On the other hand there could be no traitors to our cause. Catholic parents were compelled to send their children to Catholic schools. Failure to do so meant they were refused the sacraments. In my parish there was one couple who defied the church and sent their two children to the State school. The parents and children attended mass each Sunday but the former were unable to receive Communion. Needless to say the whole parish followed the progress of the two children closely and there was not only a sigh of relief but an added feeling of triumph when they failed to do better than those at the Catholic school. There was an even greater feeling of triumph when the boy became a drop-out at university. God's hand at work no doubt!

Much has changed since those days but old habits and prejudices die hard. I was reminded of this when a friend of mine showed me a letter



her mother wrote to her during the Queen's Jubilee year. Her mother had watched the celebrations on television in Sydney and had written:

On Tuesday night last they showed us the Queen and her tour of the river and at night 2 hours of pageantry and fine works and the Royal Family on the balcony and the huge huge crowd singing Rule Britannia - Land of Hope and Glory - and God Save the Queen, the smiling beautiful girl in bright yellow, what a sight, fantastic in its real sense - I sang with them, had tears in my eyes and anger in my heart that anyone would dare mention a republic only the Catholics, because they'd like the Pope

Last time I was home my mother was lamenting the changes in the church. 'Singing hymns just like the Protestants' was one complaint. (She always told my father that his liking for hymn singing was a 'throw back' to his Protestant youth.) The nuns also came in for comment. 'Can't tell them from your next door neighbour these days.' 'Skins up round their necks' sniffed my 90 year old aunt. I went to Mass in Gunnedah and when I saw the nuns tripping around, gossiping to all and sundry, in skirts that weren't far off mini, I began to have doubts myself. It was as if the good Lord heard me for at that moment the priest finished Mass, turned to the congregation and announced the final hymn. For one terrible moment I feared it might be 'Rock of Ages'. But no. In loud tones, with all the vigour of former days the organ peeled forth, 'Faith of Our Fathers'. And I must admit, I smiled.

## Peter Carroll

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### INTERVIEW

Peter Carroll, the Christian Brother - one cannot think of them apart, so completely does he assume the character and the character absorb the actor.

(Eric Braun in *Plays and Players*)

Anna Rutherford interviewed Peter Carroll in London in October, 1979, when *The Christian Brothers* was playing at the Riverside Studios.

*Can you say something about the reaction to the play in Australia?*

It's been a very popular play with the joy of recognition playing a major role. There hasn't really been any flack from the Christian brothers or the church organizations. Most Christian brothers today are of a younger generation, the play depicts the situation they grew up in but not as it exists now. They actually regard it as a sort of celebration which is interesting. There was of course the instance in Melbourne when Mr Santamaria went to town about it but unfortunately he hadn't read the text. He drew exception to things that were written in a review of the play in which the adoration of the Virgin was wrongly referred to and this got him off on the wrong track. It proved a bonus for the play for it gave it enormous publicity. There have been some older people I have spoken to who have been upset by the play, who see exposed mercilessly that kind of set-up that they sacrificed so much for. But they are really very few and far between.

*You said that the younger brothers regarded it as a celebration. In what way?*

Your attitude to the play depends very much on your attitude to that system of education. If you think a child being beaten with a strap is a shocking and degrading thing then there's a lot in the play that will shock you. If on the other hand someone getting cuffed over the head is something that happens as a part of life, and remember it was a very working-class community, and the brothers were very working-class people, then it's funny. It's really just what your attitude is to that kind of educational set-up. I think that people who are still in the order, although it's a different set up today, must admire the brother, otherwise they wouldn't be there.

*You've gone through that education yourself haven't you? Do you find it worthwhile celebrating?*

Yes I do. I was caned a good deal, but it was just what happened, it didn't worry me unduly and I had a great time imitating various teachers

and obviously storing up impressions which all came back and which stood me in good stead professionally. I don't know that I'd want a child of mine to be caned but I felt that the men who taught me were essentially good men who had my interests at heart and I admired them and liked them very much. I think that what stops them from being brutal is they really did have my interests at heart. They were working-class Catholics and that was exactly my background. So they identified very much with my needs and I think that's more important as opposed to simply hitting someone. In a way it's a form of love.

*Coming back to the reaction of the Christian brothers. How about the older ones? Have any of them thought that this was a harsh judgement on them?*

I haven't in fact spoken to very many. I gave a performance at the Christian Brothers' school at Lewisham in Sydney, Ron Blair's old school. There were a couple of older brothers there and one of them, with a rather brusque manner, said 'Yes, that's all right, you can say that, but I think I'm going back to write something on the modern system of education which is just a mess, a total mess'. The part they feel is most disturbing is the part that deals with the private doubts of the man because these were things you just weren't supposed to have.

*You talked about the joy of recognition on the part of the Australian audiences. How well do you think the play will carry to an audience which doesn't have this recognition?*

I think that audience reaction in England has been very different from Australia precisely in that area. Audience response here has been much more subdued and the play has therefore shifted into a darker vein, the personal tragedy of the character has become more pronounced as a result because the comedy isn't as uproarious as in Australia. That's one element that I don't feel communicates as strongly here. The other area is the linguistic register in which it is written, that kind of labour-orientated, church, parliamentary register of voice in particular (Cardinal Gilroy, Arthur Calwell) for which there is no real equivalent here. The Labour politicians are different in England. So what comes across here is the anxiousness and formality of a classroom technique but not all those subtle shades of vocal resonance that the Australian audience picked up immediately and which delighted them so much.

The reviews here have all been favourable but all they say is related to Catholic education in England and the Irish aspect of it, but the Irish in Australia are such a different kettle of fish as is Catholic education, or was then. What I ask the English audience to do is to wipe out their background and try and view it as if they had this other knowledge which I suppose is impossible.

*In a review in Plays and Players Eric Braun writes: 'Carroll's supreme achievement is to show his class the humanity and self doubt behind the dogmatist, he illumines the good intentions behind the manic behaviour of the Christian Brother.' Do you find the tragedy of the man central to the play?*

Yes, I do, I think the play has a hidden nerve. I'm 35 and know so many writers, actors, and directors who have a Catholic background and experience and who have either rejected it wholeheartedly, or partly rejected the form, but who nevertheless can't shake it off in their writing or directing. They have lost their childhood faith and find it a distressing thing in a way. The loneliness that this produces is something which is very central to the play. Ron (Blair) wrote to get it out of his system. He hated his education and it was something he wanted to write about. I think though that he mixed it with a lot of love.

*Personally I find very little hate in the play and a lot of love, a celebration in a way.*

Well I do too, and it's that area that is very pertinent for people of my age who grew up in the system. In many, many ways it was a very good education system and it was also a political education system, a very idealistic thing in a way. It was working class and the teachers were determined to get those kids into the middle class, into the professions, the public service etc. The ends justified the means. And they succeeded. They created these middle class people many of whom then turned away from them and that's an enormous tragedy. I think it's misleading to the play and doing it an injustice to think it is just a harsh education system under attack. Another point is that you can't compare it with education today. You have to compare it to state school education of that time which also would have been harsh. And I must say having taught in schools myself I know only too well the incredible frustration if you're faced with 30 or 40 kids who really just don't want to be there. Tremendous

dous strains were put on the teachers because the class sizes were enormous, 50 in a class was quite normal and it could rise as high as 80. This was because of lack of both teachers and classrooms.

*There's been much comment about the ending of the play. Do you have anything to say about this?*

It never really worried me in rehearsal. I found it a particularly satisfying part of the play, partly because I was coming to the end and I was very tense about it especially from the memory point of view in the early performances. It always seemed I was breathing a sigh of relief by the time I got to that bit. Although the play isn't naturalistic it sets up naturalistic conventions in the audience's perception that they are in a classroom, that the chair is the boy. Suddenly when the chair is being painted it's like you're painting the boy and that takes you out of the naturalistic mode altogether. It's an image of education; the whole thing. There's a line just before the ending which says 'I can't educate you, all I can do is give you a primer, an undercoat and then a first coat to be going on with'. Well, I take the blue painting, blue because it's the Virgin's colour, to be the first coat to be going on with. I suppose any education system moulds personality into a specific kind, to give it a specific awareness, a specific view of reality, and that's what I would see the painting of the chair as. It's done in a very soothing, caressing manner which the litany enhances in a beautiful way. It's a whole image of education presented in a surreal moment. I gave a couple of performances in Adelaide before I left to 600 Christian brothers which was a wonderful experience. One of the brothers I talked to said after all the doubts in the play he'd found the acceptance of the brother through the litany and through the calm painting of the chair very encouraging and very helpful. He had himself gone through a crisis and had reached some kind of calm that he felt he was glad about, something that gave a possibility of renewal and something more.

*That's one of the things I see, the painting of the chair as a renewal, an acceptance of a fate he can't do anything about, which of course constitutes the tragedy.*

Yes. 'You have to wait for the grave.' It's such a hard line, a tough pulling down of the shutters signalling his intention to go on with courage and devotion. Although when he comes to that line we immedi-

ately see Oliver Plunkett's head and body carted all over the continent and England before being returned to Ireland and it's ludicrous. In a funny way it's also magnificent, a magnificent obsession I suppose.



Peter Carroll as the Christian Brother. Photo Peter Holderness.

## A Vision or a Waking Dream?: Ron Blair's *The Christian Brothers*

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk  
(John Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale')

Since Vatican Council II there has been a spate of works dealing with Catholicism in general and Irish Catholicism in particular. This isn't confined to Australia. In England these range from Antonia White's brilliant *Frost in May*, to a rather slick and cheap treatment of the subject in the London production of Mary McCarthy's play *Once a Catholic*. In Australia titles which spring readily to mind include Peter Kenna's *A Hard God*, Thomas Keneally's *Three Cheers for the Paraclete*, *The Devil's Playground*, and Ron Blair's *The Christian Brothers*. Without exception they stress the narrowness, rigidity and superstition of Irish Catholicism and place special emphasis on its prudery in connection with sex, a prudery designed to keep people in ignorance and to create guilt-ridden complexes. Perhaps I could give an example from my own upbringing. Physiology was one of the subjects taught at school. We were constantly asking the nun about diseases but to every question of this nature she would reply, 'Girls I will have you know that we are studying the perfect human body'. We may have been studying the perfect human body, but we were certainly not studying the complete one, for the chapters on reproduction had been very carefully removed from our textbooks.

I had a friend who attended another Catholic school where the nuns were a little more advanced in so far that they acknowledged the fact that when the girls left school boys might take them out and on their return home might even make 'improper suggestions'. In such circumstances the

girls were advised to make an aspiration and then, like *Bartleby*, say 'I would prefer not to'.

What is significant is that the works mentioned above have all been written post Vatican Council II, but are concerned with the period prior to the Council when Catholicism was a religion of law and with that a religion of certainty.

Vatican II was to make sweeping changes in a Church which for centuries had remained static and had conscripted truth. Many of the old myths were destroyed; no longer was it a mortal sin to eat meat on Friday — saints disappeared: St George, St Christopher; the latter, stripped of his title, must have bankrupted quite a few firms. The result of the relaxation of the regulations was a wholesale exodus of religious from the church. The reason for the exodus was obvious. What was to hold them? One remembered the old sermons and the talk about the two ways of life, the religious and the married. One could of course lead a good Christian life in the latter category but the former was infinitely more desirable and reserved for the chosen few. No longer was there this strict division between clergy and laity, and if the division no longer existed, why sacrifice for it.

The post-Vatican writers can look back and see the tragedy of those people who destroyed their lives for the 'truths' which the Church now so confidently rejected.

In the previous article I discussed the extraordinary sacrifice demanded of the Catholic parents to keep the parochial schools open. The same sacrifice was demanded of the men and women who taught in them. To quote Campion once more: 'They were staffed by over-worked and under-prepared men and women ... who made up for their lack of polish by rare self-sacrifice and love of their pupils'.<sup>1</sup> Most of these religious teachers would have entered the noviciate directly after leaving school. Little more than teenagers themselves — 'I wasn't much older than them then'<sup>2</sup> —, untrained, completely ignorant of life, insecure in everything except a blind belief in the one true faith and the need to sacrifice one's life to it. What made them do it? Parental pressure, the mother who every evening after the Family Rosary prays that her son will be a priest; Church pressure, the sermon that points out that there are two stations in life, the married and the religious, and whilst one can contribute to the glory of God in the former the latter is definitely to be preferred. The ultimate is to be either a Bride of Christ or Bridegroom of Mary, a relationship symbolized by the marriage ring worn by the religious after their period in the noviciate (engagement) is over. In *The*



*Christian Brothers* the central character, a Christian brother, tells the boys he teaches about the vision that led him to become a brother:

I've actually seen the Blessed Virgin Mary.

*(Pause.)*

Now I don't want to see any smirks or sniggers. The first sign of a smirk and that boy can leave the room.

*(Pause.)*

Of course when I told people about the vision just after it happened, they said it was a dream. The only thing was I spoke to men of three different nationalities simultaneously, in their own languages. For about five minutes, I had the gift of tongues! I was about a year older than you in my last year at school. I had been praying hard to the Blessed Virgin about my vocation. I wasn't sure, you see. Then one night, I'd just got into bed — the light was out — when there in the darkness at the end of my bed, she appeared. She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. All around her body was this light, emanating out of her in a slow, steady stream, giving off a sort of hum, like high tension cables. She was wearing a mantle of blue light and she smiled at me and nodded. I sat there for about a quarter of an hour after she'd gone and then got out of bed and went into the lounge room where my parents were entertaining an Armenian and a Chinaman. 'I have just seen the Blessed Virgin Mary', I said, and both my parents, the Armenian and the Chinaman each understood me in their own language. The next day I applied for entry to the novitiate. Now that gives you some idea, boys, of the personal interest the Blessed Virgin Mary has in each and every one of us. If you think you have a vocation, then you couldn't do better than pray to her for guidance.

We laugh at the ridiculousness of the vision — 'too far-fetched' some cry, a flaw in the play. But to suggest this is, I believe, to miss the very point that Ron Blair is making — namely that emotional rape created by family, church and teachers can lead to a religious hysteria which will in turn create such a vision in the mind of the teenage victim.

The setting for Ron Blair's play is a Christian Brothers' school in Sydney in the mid 1950s, the action is a class in session. There is one actor only, Peter Carroll, who plays the Christian Brother and who through an acting *tour de force* is able to evoke a whole classroom of boys. There are five props in all, a crucifix, a picture of the Virgin Mary, a blackboard, a desk, and a single chair. It is the last mentioned that holds our attention. It stands alone in the centre of the stage and is occupied by an imaginary, difficult pupil who bears the brunt of the Christian brother's anger. It is a tribute to Peter Carroll's acting that we

shrink back when he approaches the chair, feel pain when he twists the corners of the chair (the boy's ears), and wait tense and anxious for some movement when the upturned chair lies motionless on the floor.

As a social document it is a comic exposé (some would argue a savage attack) on a narrow sectarian education system as it existed at the time. There can be no doubt that the success of the play was partly due to the joy of recognition on the part of the audience (both Protestant and Catholic). But it is far more than that. It is a tragic portrayal of a lonely man who has sacrificed his life to an ideal that he has now come to question. The vision that led him to join the brothers has failed him. He now senses that life has passed him by, he craves for a human love and understanding which he knows and we know he will never have, he fears the loneliness and oblivion that the future holds for him.

There is a constant see-saw movement throughout the play between laughter and pity and fear. It opens with the boys reciting by heart Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale'. Our laughter at the lesson suddenly turns to awareness and compassion when we realize the symbolic import of Keats' poem to the brother's own condition. Throughout the play you have similar references where a topic which fits quite naturally into the classroom situation assumes a symbolic implication. The history lesson is on the French Revolution. Rejecting several answers to his question about its prime cause, 'No not the tennis court oath', the brother suggests hunger.

It's not surprising that the lesson in French on the verb to undress leads to some schoolboy vulgarity which in turn rouses the brother's wrath and leads him onto his favourite topic — sex. What characterizes the brother is his inordinate fear and horror of sex, for which he compensates with an equally inordinate devotion to the Virgin Mary. He produces what is described as 'a tame cheesecake picture from *Pix*' which he has confiscated from a pupil who has been expelled for possessing it. As he burns it he warns the boys:

Boys, the human body is a temple of the Holy Ghost and believe me, for those who abuse that temple by either posing near naked or leering on that pose are trafficking with the devil himself! And as for those who publish such photographs — in this case (consulting the print at the bottom of the page) *Sungrave* — there is a pit in hell awaiting them this very minute and in that pit is a fire (indicating the lighter) a world wider than this, which will rage and burn them body and soul. (p. 14)

He is willing to admit that the brothers 'feel these temptations of the flesh' but, he tells the boys, 'Chastity's relatively easy if you're busy ...

That's why we play handball! You look in after school one day. You'll see a few Brothers whipping the handball. Outpacing the devil. I call it'. But our Brother has an even better antidote — the Virgin Mary. 'I personally think the best way to avoid temptation is to pray to the Blessed Virgin Mary' (p. 15). Just prior to these remarks the brother had made what I believe to be a significant and important observation, the implications of which he was unaware. As he holds up the picture of the girl in the swim suit, he remarks, 'But first, boys, I want you to understand that the misguided young woman who posed for this photo has the same physical characteristics as the Blessed Virgin Mary. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with her' (p. 14). What the brother is touching on here is the whore-madonna dichotomy.

I would suggest that in connection with this point he has conscripted truth so that light has become a destructive element. If I could elaborate a little. Light is traditionally connected with truth, therefore a quest for truth would also be a quest for light, but with each conscription of 'truth' in the name of 'homogeneity' light becomes an implacable tool to subdue, perhaps exterminate. This means that in order not to conscript truth/light one is forced to move back to darkness and to start one's journey all over again, to return to the 'womb of space' like the crew in *Palace of the Peacock*. The whole truth comprises both light and darkness and in isolation either becomes a perversion of the truth. To illustrate this point one could mention Mother Earth. She is all inclusive and thus contains within her both light and darkness. The Virgin Mary is one of her aspects who represents a particular group's concept of light and truth in the shape of sexual innocence and the immaculate conception. Her dark side would be the opposite of the virgin, i.e. the whore, but this aspect is certainly not part of the image of the virgin figure, even though it is implicit to Mother Earth. The Virgin Mary may idealize a circulation of light which deprives itself of the rich light/darkness circulation from which it is sprung and excludes from itself a descent into resources of revision and renewal. This, I would suggest, is what has happened with the Brother. It goes without saying that for him there is no place for sex outside of matrimony, and even then there is no suggestion that it might be enjoyed. Ask any Catholic brought up at that time the question 'What is the prime purpose of matrimony?' and you can be pretty certain that the answer will come back that 'the prime purpose of matrimony is the pro creation of children'. 'I never ask an old boy', says the Christian Brother, 'if he's kept the faith. That's none of my business. I just ask how many children he's got. That's usually the give-away. If

he's got five or six, you can be pretty certain' (p. 11).

What characterizes the brother's method of education is his use of violence — 'the chair is beaten, kicked, knocked to the ground'. His justification for the use of violence is one so often used by those who preach objective truth — the end justifies the means, all is permitted in the indoctrination of the one true faith. We can see it for what it is, an outward manifestation of the frustration and sense of loss which he feels subconsciously but which his conscious mind refuses to acknowledge. To illustrate my point: He has just beaten a boy to within an inch of his life for his inability to answer a question about the soul.

The great issue is whether or not you (*thumping out the words on his desk*) save your immortal soul! Hey! What are you doing? By God, sonny, you're a sly hound. I'm talking about your immortal soul. Do you know what that is?

*(He charges to the chair.)*

Your soul is in peril, sonny, in peril of eternal judgment.

*(He drags the chair up to the blackboard and, still holding it, writes the word 'soul' on the board with his free hand.)*

What's that word? Right! Soul. Do you have a soul, sonny? Sometimes I very much doubt it, you're such an animal. How do you know you have a soul?

*(Pause.)*

What? It's got nothing to do with the ten commandments! Fool of a boy! What does the catechism say? Eh? 'I know I have a soul...' Well, repeat it after me! 'I know I have a soul ... because I am alive ... and because I can think ... reason and choose freely.'

'I can think ... reason and choose freely.' His tragedy lies in the fact that this is exactly what he can no longer do and he knows it.

Towards the end of the play he once more describes the personal vision of the Virgin Mary which led him to enter the novitiate. This time, however, he ascribes it to another brother who acts in the capacity of his alter ego.

I ask him if what he saw all those years ago has helped him through the years. He says ... he doesn't really know. At the time, they dismissed his vision. He now wonders whether or not it was some self-induced miasma or adolescent mirage. He says he often wonders what it might be like with a wife and a mortgage. 'Then leave', I tell him. 'You're not too old to begin! Nobody wants you to stay here if

you're not happy'. He says it's only the devil tempting him with doubts and that he must pray; for, he says, there's nothing more comie than an old man who is both broke and looking for a wife.

It should be remembered that the play is set during the time when most of the teachers in the religious schools had no university or state-recognized teaching certificates. 'We didn't worry about getting degrees much in those days' (p. 17), the brother tells his class. This was of no consequence as long as they remained within the system — outside they became pathetic figures. Trained to do one thing only — teach — they were no longer able to do so because their lack of qualifications made them unacceptable as teachers in the state schools. But it was more than practical implications that held the brother and thousands of others like him back. Inculcated into him was the belief that the fallen priest was the worst pariah of all with a terrible fate awaiting him. 'You know, boys don't you, that the worst punishments in hell are reserved for fallen religious' (p. 15). Added to the fear was the guilt. His leaving would not only be a desertion of the Church, but also of his Bride in Christ, the Virgin Mary. This would haunt him for the rest of his life and make any normal, sexual relationship almost completely impossible. As he remarks — 'The Church is a bad enemy to have, boys' (p. 34). Prior to this section of self-analysis, questioning and doubt he had removed his soutane. Now, realizing that he is no longer free to choose, that he must 'wait for the grave' for the answer to his questions, he symbolically once more dons his soutane, praying that he will 'keep the faith with the same devotion and courage as did Bishop Plunkett in the face of English torture three hundred years ago' (p. 37). Like all the other references in the play, the one to Oliver Plunkett is also apt; the brother like him is a martyr to the cause. The play ends with him reciting the litany of the Virgin Mary with the class. As he does so, he takes a pot of paint and commences to paint the chair blue. There have been numerous discussions about the significance of this. I would argue that it symbolizes the renewal of vows, an act of allegiance to his Bride in Christ. Whilst stating this, I do not in any way wish to imply that he has reached the state of re-affirmation and confidence that one finds in the concluding lines of Herbert's poem, 'The Collar'. On the contrary. Trapped as he is, there is nothing else to do than to cling desperately to the vision that has in many ways destroyed his life.

What one finds in Ron Blair's play is a great deal of love and very little hate. What is absent from it is the cheap mockery found in *The Devil's*

*Playground* (I'm thinking in particular of the scene where Keneally plays the role of the retreat priest) or the slick humour of *Once a Catholic*. There are two works in particular with which I associate *The Christian Brothers*: First Herbert's 'The Collar', which I have already mentioned, and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* — Marlowe has been discussing imperialism and then remarks:

What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea — something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to...<sup>2</sup>

Amongst other things, *Heart of Darkness* presents us with the perversion of the idea, and finally Kurtz reaches 'that supreme moment of complete knowledge'. As he did, so

He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision — he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath  
"The horror! The horror!"<sup>3</sup>

It seems to me, albeit on a less grand scale, this is what *The Christian Brothers* is about. The brother, like Kurtz, began with 'an unselfish belief in the idea — something (he could) set up and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to'. The play, like *Heart of Darkness*, shows us the perverse and destructive effects of this idea, and the Brother, like Kurtz, comes to a realization that he has possibly sacrificed his life for a vain and unworthy thing. The dilemma of Ron Blair's brother is that of any man who has dedicated his life to a vision and lived to question it. The tragedy lies in his consciousness that his life has been wasted but that he has no other alternative than to play it out as he has always done to the bitter end.

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?  
Fled is that music — Do I wake or sleep?  
(John Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale')

## NOTES

1. Edmund Campion, 'Incarnations of Immortality', in Ron Blair, *The Christian Brothers* (Sydney: Currency Methuen Drama Pty Ltd, 1974), p. 59.
2. Ron Blair, *The Christian Brothers* (Sydney: Currency Methuen Drama Pty Ltd,

1976), p. 12. Subsequent references are to this edition and are included in the text.

3. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (edition? (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 10.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

# Judith Rodriguez

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## FOUR PHOTOGRAPHS

Snapshots of the forties, hopefully taken by mothers  
mostly, waited for, pored over past hope. Here's  
the three of them, out by the back stairs with the pedigreed cockers.  
Young ribs. Well, maybe not him, plenty there though, all day  
covering paper with music. Kept him out of mischief.  
Fine boys ... or this; a half-dozen sepia gum-trees,  
the door-open Chev, and picnic-rugs, Dad standing straight,  
sockless nine-year-old flirting a brooch, and the stolid  
small brother, mother-neat, in the hand-knitted jumpers of wartime.  
(Taught drill after lunch, and never to ride on running-boards.)

These other forties,  
dismay pinches.  
Who are these failures  
fronting up to stares?  
Which end of a camera  
are the half-frank young  
getting their fun now?  
What's he scared of? What's she hiding?

It's all there, like reading  
the pained style  
of the nib-taught down-of-time  
Just War,  
gone down in a slither  
of automatic gears,  
obsolescence and ball-points.  
— They're still in there, wary, fighting.

## TUTORIAL

Let's be frank: duplicity's fun.  
Small outlay and moderate exertion.  
It's addictive, mind you, with hidden  
expense when you expand operations.  
At the end of a short course in duplicity  
you try the whopper — they all do —  
suddenly you're driving four-in-hand  
with three at least gone over the cliff.  
Well, I ask you, what did you want,  
integrity or experience? Skill's  
one thing and success is another.  
Learn from failures! that old chestnut —  
keep succeeding or you won't be around  
to be skilful. Alternatively  
you won't have anything left  
to be skilful about. Hang on  
to your seat, hang on to your investment,  
and with any hands left over  
hang on. (Let go of the rest  
when anything you grab answers.  
Remember most of you are losers.  
Winners can throw away the course-notes.)



## Fictional Breakthrough and the Unveiling of 'unspeakable rites' in Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* and Wilson Harris's *Yurokon*

My intention in this paper is first to present and very briefly substantiate Wilson Harris's interpretation of *Heart of Darkness*, then move on to Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* and Harris's story *Yurokon* to show how these authors' treatment of cannibalism suggests a clear progress on Conrad's approach to primitive people.

Harris sees *Heart of Darkness* as an important landmark in the history of fiction because it moves towards a recognition of otherness that he deems an essential element in the modern novel. He thinks that a truly imaginative narrative must acknowledge the heterogeneous make-up of both individual and society. In his critical essays he often points to a connection between imperialism in life and in art and insists on the need to break down homogeneous and cultural monoliths to be genuinely creative. In 'The Phenomenal Legacy', for example, he writes that one must

enter upon those alternative realities ... which may lead to a new scale or illumination of the meaning of 'community'. Such a willingness to participate imaginatively borders upon a *confession of weakness*, and this, therefore, paradoxically, supplies the creative wisdom or potential to draw upon strange reserves and perspectives one would otherwise overlook or reject, detached as we feel we are within an absolute tower of strength (false tower of strength).<sup>1</sup>

Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* does 'enter upon those alternative realities' and his discovery of them is paralleled with a 'confession of weakness', a

temporary acknowledgement of the white man's limitations and a crumbling of his self-assurance and sense of superiority. At the end of the novel, however, he agrees to sustain in Kurtz's *Intended* the 'absolute' and 'false tower of strength' he had so consistently undermined in the course of the narrative. Harris writes about it in an essay entitled 'The Complexity of Freedom':

Conrad's achievement ... in *Heart of Darkness* was to arrive upon a frontier of imagination which his doomed characters, obsessed with signs of blackness, never crossed. A frontier nevertheless that was an extraordinary achievement at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

Harris also points out that although Conrad 'break(s) with uniform prejudice' his novel is still 'shrouded by the conditions of his age and by the tool of narrative he had inherited from the English homogeneous novel of the 18th and 19th centuries'. Indeed Marlow's attitude to the Africans is not devoid of paternalism, though, on the whole, his alternative representation of blacks and whites makes for an almost systematic exposure of the shortcomings and deceptions of white civilization. Admittedly, Conrad has an evolutionary view of history which makes him see the African as the ancestor of so-called civilized man. On the other hand, he clearly suggests that civilization is largely a varnish hiding the darkness that subsists at the heart of all men.

Marlow's awareness that Africa and its peoples remain an enigma to him contrasts with the prejudices of the time and is an indication of his imaginative response to both. The most eloquent expression of it is to be found in his admiration for the cannibals' restraint and the realization that their intended cannibalism calls for an attitude other than mere prejudice: 'I would no doubt have been properly horrified', says Marlow, 'had it not occurred to me that the headman and his chaps must be very hungry'.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, Kurtz's unrestrained material cannibalism suggested in his 'weirdly voracious aspect' and in 'his mouth opening voraciously as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind',<sup>3</sup> comes in for heavy moral condemnation.

Conrad reaches the frontier of imagination which might have opened on a fuller acceptance of otherness balanced by a recognition of the white man's shortcomings when Marlow reads the postscript to Kurtz's report: 'Exterminate all the brutes!'. This, on Conrad's part, expresses the 'confession of weakness' Harris alludes to, for it acknowledges implicitly the total failure of white civilization to put its ideals into practice. Marlow is fully aware of this failure. Yet by lying to Kurtz's *Intended* at the end of

the novel, thereby supporting the self-deceptive idealism which takes the superiority of one civilization for granted, there is a sense in which he denies the reality of the natives and the significance of his experience. Harris, who equates language with experience, sees this denial as an 'eclipse of the word', a limitation imposed on the narrative by Conrad's despair as a result of the prevailing outlook of his time. Harris writes:

A narrative tool or habit of command that exercises itself as perfectly natural, perfectly beautiful and normal with a *homogeneous* cultural imperative, where it is rooted in consenting classes and common values, builds into itself an equation of inner eclipse as it generates the suppression of others in a *heterogeneous* situation. That was the frontier of paradox between Europe and Africa that *Heart of Darkness* achieved. Conrad went no further ... and inner eclipse stops short of inner space or transformed narrative tool and medium of consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

I should now like to apply Harris's approach to fiction to *A Fringe of Leaves* and see how much further than *Heart of Darkness* it goes in its recognition and continuing acceptance of otherness, for White's novel, published three quarters of a century later than Conrad's, brings it inevitably to mind and presents some similarities with it.

It seems to me that from the very beginning until Ellen Roxburgh's departure from Moreton Bay at the end of the novel White presents what Harris calls a 'heterogeneous situation', in this case a juxtaposition of two worlds or rather of two realities within one world: that of respectable middle class settlers or visitors to colonial Australia, and that of all who do not belong to this class including Ellen herself, the convicts and the aborigines. Australia, as has often been pointed out, is in this novel as in *Parzifal*, a country of self-discovery, the equivalent of Africa in *Heart of Darkness*: I would not say, as one critic puts it, that 'it gives back the reflection of our own human and social evil'<sup>6</sup> because this is to assume that only evil is to be discovered in the interior and is associated with the rejected element of society. White's approach is more complex than this simple distribution of good and evil would suggest. As with Conrad, his main emphasis, is on our erroneous conception of evil and on what we share with those excluded from society. Rather in Austin Roxburgh's words Australia is 'the country beyond'<sup>7</sup> where Ellen discovers unsuspected depths of both good and evil and achieves fulfilment through her alliance with men alien to her, aborigines and a convict.

Ellen too is presented as alien. She is from Cornwall, 'a remote county ... of dark people' (12). She arouses suspicion even in Australia where any kind of difference is feared and abhorred, as witnesses Mrs

Merivale's attitude in the opening chapter not only towards Ellen but towards an emancipist and the aborigines whom she calls 'loathsome savages' (20). The darker side of Ellen, however, is associated with possibilities of fulfilment which contradict Miss Scrimshaw's assertion that 'there was nothing spiritual in Mrs Roxburgh' (14). For all her earthliness and repressed sensuality, one senses in her a yearning first satisfied by her immersion in St Hya's pool and sustained by her dream of Tintagel which symbolizes the magic she needs to believe in. Ellen is not the equivalent of Marlow but of Kurtz and is therefore directly involved in the reality she discovers. That, unlike Kurtz, we should see her from the inside is already an advance on Conrad. In Van Diemen's Land she becomes aware that her as yet undefined need and its fulfilment might take shape in the country. She writes in her diary:

I begin to feel closer to the country than to any human being. Reason ... tells me I'm wrong in thinking thus, but my instincts hanker after something deeper... (92)

Reason is systematically undermined in the novel in the person of Austin Roxburgh and as a very inadequate tool to help Ellen suppress the irrational in herself. As in *Heart of Darkness*, reason as a token of civilization proves extremely vulnerable and is even shown to have a relative meaning: Ellen's single-minded search for food in the bush, which from the safety of civilized life would seem purely instinctive, is called 'the only rational behaviour' (227). In fact one of the interesting aspects of the narrative is the unobtrusive though constant way in which it questions the accepted version of reality by offering an alternative understanding of values and of people. So Jack Chance, the escaped convict and necessarily a 'miscreant' in Garnet Roxburgh's words is, as Ellen acknowledges, full of 'delicacy' (288) and 'a decent man at heart' (268) whereas the respectable Garnet is at bottom definitely a miscreant. On the whole in Van Diemen's Land evil is associated with the free citizens rather than the convicts. Ellen's hard upbringing but also her moral uncertainty and lack of self-righteousness help her see how thin the barrier is between the so-called good and the evil. So that even before her experience in the interior she is able to see some of the convicts at least as victims of the established order while considering herself lucky to be 'on the winning side' (95). On the other side, that of the eclipsed as Harris would say, are not only the convicts but the aborigines who early in the novel are lumped together by Pilcher, the second mate of the *Bristol Maid*, as the only inhabitants of the dark interior: 'only dirty blacks ... and a few poor

beggars in stripes who've bolted from one hell to another' (135).

In White's treatment of the aborigines we get a juxtaposition of the stereotyped view which dismisses them as 'loathsome savages' and 'dirty blacks' and, on the other hand, an unprejudiced apprehension of the characteristics of an alien people. The unprejudiced view prevails gradually as Ellen comes to recognize in her aboriginal mentors behavioural features very similar to individual or social attitudes she had experienced in the civilized world. White does not force the point on his readers but subtly conveys the commonness of basic human reactions such as fear or vanity when, for example, Ellen is being adorned for display by an old aboriginal woman and thinks: 'it might have been old Mrs Roxburgh adding or subtracting some jewel or feather in preparation for a dinner or ball' (240). More importantly, White evokes in a masterful way the nomadic life of the aborigines, determined by their necessary quest for food. He presents their behaviour and customs as inherent in their poverty-stricken condition. Naturally, great progress has been made in anthropology since Conrad wrote; White's presentation of native people is more perceptive than Conrad's for whom the Africans necessarily remained a complete enigma. By comparison with the aborigines Ellen who, together with her clothes, has lost the veneer of civilization often seems brutish and unrestrained in her haste to devour whatever food she can lay hands on. Her hardihood when snatching food from her masters or her ecstasy when she devours snakeflesh remind us of Marlow's assertion in *Heart of Darkness* that 'No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is. And as to ... beliefs, and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze'.

Ellen's culminating experience in the bush is her participation in rites of cannibalism. This, as the narrator insists, satisfies both her physical and her spiritual hunger, a spiritual hunger which she felt long before her stay with the aborigines. It is a little surprising that the novel should have been approved of because it supposedly resists the mystical trend to be found in White's earlier fiction. For the scene of cannibalism, which is also a climax in the novel, is obviously given a mystical significance. Ellen eats human flesh as one partakes in a sacrament and the mystical union achieved is crucial in White's exploration of the possible cross-fertilization of opposite worlds.

Ironically, cannibalism is first mentioned in the novel not in connection with primitive tribes but as it crosses the mind of Austin Roxburgh, the rationalist, who thinks that the dead steward on the boat 'had he not

been such an unappetizing morsel, might have contributed appreciably to an exhausted larder' (206). We immediately recall Marlow's hope in *Heart of Darkness* that he is not so unappetizing as the faithless pilgrims. Austin's boundless self-disgust reminds us that cannibalism is probably the most misunderstood and least acceptable feature of otherness in alien peoples. In spite of White's strong irony in reporting Austin's thought, cannibalism is presented as an experience which, as with Ellen, might gratify a spiritual need when he hears the words:

*This is the body of Spurgeon which I have reserved for thee, take eat, and give thanks for a body which was spiritual matter ... Austin Roxburgh was not only ravenous for the living flesh, but found himself anxiously ficking the corners of his mouth to prevent any overflow of precious blood. (267)*

The idea of a redeeming sacrifice serving as spiritual nourishment seems to me central to this passage which clearly prefigures Ellen's experience in the bush. The notion of sacrifice also prevails when Ellen first comes upon the probable remnants of a cannibalistic ritual, discovers the remains of the first mate and sees that in his grimacing skull 'the mouth atoned for all that is fiendish by its resignation to suffering' (229). Sacrifice, of a human and divine nature, is indirectly suggested when Ellen arrives on the scene of a cannibalistic feast and thinks that the participants are like 'communicants coming out of church looking bland and forgiven after the early service' (243). The rites in which she then takes part no doubt belong to the category Marlow calls 'unspeakable', and indeed White points out that 'in the light of Christian morality' her behaviour amounts to an 'abomination', a term also used by Marlow. But we see how much further than Conrad White is able to go in his imaginative understanding of alienness by presenting cannibalism from the point of view of those who practised it. As Geoffrey Blainey writes in *Triumph of the Nomads*:

In the 19th century cannibalism was often regarded as the greatest depravity, the antithesis of civilization, and was so viewed by many who regularly took holy communion and believed they were thereby eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ. In fact, many aboriginals ate human flesh in the same spirit, believing that they thus acquired some of the strength of those who had died.<sup>3</sup>

While presenting Ellen's cannibalism as a participation in a sacrament nourishing 'some darker need of the human spirit' (245) White's allusion to the reproof by Christian morality points to the self-deception of 19th-

century Christians. This is ironically illustrated by Ellen's disgust and pity for those she calls 'starving and ignorant savages' (244) though immediately afterwards she picks up a human bone and chews the flesh clinging to it. Nevertheless, her experience is predominantly mystical, its parallel with the communion suggesting a union not with Christ in particular but with all suffering men. After her return from the bush Ellen does not say like Conrad's Marlow 'It was my imagination that wanted soothing'<sup>10</sup> but 'I never understood so deeply ... as then ... For me too (it was) a kind of communion' (328-9).

We can say that at this point the narrative has become in Harris's words a 'transformed ... medium of consciousness'.<sup>11</sup> The dialogue between opposites which he sees as an essential need in modern fiction is illustrated in Ellen's new capacity to unite, if only momentarily with the land and its people. Whereas earlier in the novel 'the spirits of place were not hers to conjure up' (222), soon after her communion through cannibalism she joins the aborigines in their 'supplication or lament' (246) and for the first time 'the spirit of the place ... took possession of her' (246). Soon also she takes part in a corroboree which becomes identified in her mind with a Cornish festival, and this is a way of bridging the gap between alien cultures. At this corroboree she meets Jack Chance, the escaped convict who has been living for years with the aborigines. While he dances 'her lips parted to receive — the burnt sacrifice? the bread and wine?' (255). Clearly, the dance is a manifestation of spiritual life and is given added significance through the fact that in Jack merge the aboriginal and the convict, the sacrificial victim with whom Ellen at this moment is prepared to commune. In this she shows the 'susceptibility to otherness' Harris mentions in 'The Complexity of Freedom'. Through her individual experience of cannibal rites and the corroboree, the essential relatedness of two peoples is revealed as well as a fundamental kinship between their myths. As Michael Cotter writes, 'Ellen's cannibalism ... is the relocation of the values of one culture into the symbolic forms of another'.<sup>12</sup> It could also be argued that White presents cannibalism as a universal phenomenon for there are other forms of it in the novel.

We may now wonder whether the assertion of kinship and the self-knowledge Ellen gains from her experience are sustained or betrayed by the rest of the novel. While satisfying her own need for a human and sensual love, her relationship with Jack Chance is, of course, another example of a union with 'the other' although she oscillates all through

between attraction and repulsion, total commitment and callous or guilty rejection until they reach Moreton Bay and her silent yet eloquent reticence frightens him into running back into the bush. It seems to me that her essential ambivalence both before and after her final rescue while she stays with the Lovells at Moreton Bay is the main strength of the narrative. Though she says 'I am responsible ... to all those who have been rejected' (317), White does not fall into the trap of suggesting a final identification that would entail complete self-denial. Her stay at Moreton Bay is repeatedly described in terms of a social imprisonment that she helplessly accepts. But she also seeks and achieves a fleeting union with men (334) and women convicts (336) and experiences a moment of beatitude under Pilcher's inscription GOD IS LOVE. She sees the danger of revealing the full extent of her self-knowledge but cannot repress nor refrain from expressing her guilt and remorse at her betrayal of Jack or that 'sudden cry of pain' that escapes her as they leave Moreton Bay. To the end White juxtaposes two opposite realities in her consciousness, and what she thinks on the morrow of her arrival at Moreton Bay remains largely true when she leaves it:

It saddened her to think she might never become acceptable to either of the two incompatible worlds even as they might never accept to merge. (335)

The conclusion of the novel and the possibility that the heroine might once again find refuge in a bourgeois marriage has given rise to many contradictory interpretations, some looking with approval upon Ellen's return to the civilized world, others seeing in it a sure sign that she will lose the benefit of self-realization, others yet suggesting that nothing is more unlikely than that she will allow the steely circle of bourgeois life to close upon her. On the other hand, the large critical consensus of approval at Ellen's return to normality is rather alarming and denies the significance of her experience. It doesn't seem to me that White optimistically suggests that Ellen will find fulfilment in a return to conventional society and marriage. Thinking of Mr Jevons, she reminds herself 'that the solid is not unrelated to the complacent and that (he) might assert rights she would not wish to grant' (364). In spite of the small incident that brings them together, the end is ambiguous and therefore essentially open-ended. Ellen's imaginative understanding of the 'other' is not denied but neither is her capacity to relapse into callousness at any moment. She remains human, i.e. capable of the best and the worst, and what is important is that her quest should remain unfinished. It is her



continuing ambivalence and the subtlety with which it is conveyed that seem to me to mark a distinct advance on Conrad's narrative.

There appears at first sight to be very little in common between *A Prince of Leers* and Harris's novella *Yurokon*, whose poetic terseness and intricate metaphorical fabric are at the opposite pole of White's long and fairly traditional narrative. Moreover, the exploring consciousness in *Yurokon* is not as in White's novel or Conrad's that of a European confronted with an alien reality but that of a Carib Indian boy. This shows a great imaginative boldness since Harris does not hesitate to probe into what is usually termed the 'primitive mind', and presents this as a necessary process to achieve a native or host consciousness.

I cannot analyse Harris's story here but would like to suggest briefly how it compares with White's novel. The similarity between the two works lies in their dualistic presentation of cannibalism seen both in the light of the conventional reactions it arouses and as a means of uniting with the 'other', which in Harris's terms amounts to a 'digestion and liberation of contrasting spaces'. In White's novel, however, the two moral approaches coexist and even in Ellen are not easily reconcilable. In Harris's story Yurokon's shocked awareness of his ancestor's cannibalism is transformed into a rebirth of sensibility.

For the Caribs as for the Aborigines cannibalism had a spiritual significance and Michael Swan calls it 'a kind of transubstantiation in reverse: the flesh or the powdered bone (that the Caribs would mix with their drink) contains the living spirit of the dead'.<sup>13</sup> After eating a ritual morsel of their enemies, the Caribs would also fashion flutes out of their bones, thus transforming these human bones into music. Harris merges this custom with the myth of Yurokon which tells of bush baby spectres arising from the Caribs' pots and is linked with a strong sense of guilt among them for it told how a woman threw the baby Yurokon into her pot, as a result of which its mother brought pain, misery and death into the world. But Harris suggests that the emergence of bush baby spectres from the Caribs' pots was an indication that their homogeneity and proud psychological landscape had begun to erode, for the Caribs were themselves fierce conquerors before being conquered by Spain. The spectres were an inner omen diverging from their conquering posture and therefore implied the possibility of a new consciousness. The flute and song made out of bone have the same significance as the Yurokon baby arising in twine-like smoke from the pot. Both are the expression of what Harris calls in his story a 'transubstantiation of species'.<sup>14</sup>

The theme of the story is the encounter between Caribs and Spaniards and the clash between their equally cannibalistic behaviour, whether in a literal or a materialistic sense, amidst elements which are also at war with one another and a source of disruption so that cannibalism is given a cosmic dimension. It is, to begin with, a metaphor for conquest. As Harris writes in 'The Native Phenomenon', 'conquest is a berserk or cannibal realism'.<sup>45</sup> Then it also becomes a sacrament, not through the mere absorption of a sacrificial other but because in the Caribs' case it went together with a breakdown and an erosion of their homogeneous personality and finally led to the 'confession of weakness' which, as mentioned above, can entail a new conception of community.

'Here I am,' says Yurokon, 'no one and nothing, yet here I stand . . . Whose spirit is it that will not — *cannot* — die?' (69)

We find in this declaration the usual paradox in Harris's fiction of a nothingness which is yet the dawn of a renaissance, of ruin which is also origin and is symbolized by the flute of bone and the native symphony one character dreams of.

To conclude I should like to submit the following quotation for your consideration. It sums up the tragic transformation of the Caribs from fierce conquerors into an extinct people. But in the dream of a twentieth-century exploring consciousness it points to the essential unity between conquerors and conquered, a unity which, as the narrator suggests, the Caribs had not foreseen when they appointed themselves 'cannibals or ogre of place' (71). The passage also presents the juxtaposition of contraries which illustrates in the very texture of the narrative the 'capacity to sustain contrasts' I have discussed:

As the Caribs withdrew across the ridge of the land and began to descend into a continent of shadow, each knot of ash linked them to the enemy. And Yurokon was the scarred urchin of dreams, victor-in-victim; over the centuries he remained unaging (ageless) as a legend, a curious symptom or holocaust of memory, whose burnt-out stations were equally embryonic as a cradle, lugue of man, unchained chain of fires.

It was this that drew the Caribs to the end of their age. They ceased to fret about names since namelessness was a sea of names. They ceased, too, to care about dwindling numbers since numberlessness was native in heaven, stars beyond reckoning. (75)

## NOTES

1. Wilson Harris, 'The Phenomenal Legacy', *The Literary Half-Yearly*, XI, 2 (July 1989), 8; italics mine.
2. Wilson Harris, 'The Complexity of Freedom', *Explorations*, a collection of Wilson Harris's Essays (Aarhus, 1980).
3. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Harmondsworth, 1977), p. 58.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 85 and 105.
5. 'The Complexity of Freedom'.
6. Veronica Brady, 'A Fringe of Leaves: Civilization by the Skin of our Teeth', *Seachurly*, 2 (1977), 125.
7. Patrick White, *A Fringe of Leaves*, first published in 1976 (Harmondsworth, 1977), p. 137. All further references are to this edition and given in the text.
8. *Heart of Darkness*, p. 60.
9. Geoffrey Blainey, *Trial and Error: A History of Ancient Australia* (Melbourne, 1973), p. 112.
10. *Heart of Darkness*, p. 102.
11. 'The Complexity of Freedom'.
12. Michael Cotter, 'Fragmentation, Reconstitution and the Colonial Experience: the Aborigine in White's Fiction', *South Pacific Images*, edited by Chris Tiffin (South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, 1978), p. 176.
13. Michael Suran, *The March of El Dorado* (London, 1958), p. 285.
14. 'Yurokon', in *The Sleepers of Rorima* (London, 1970), p. 67. All references are to this edition and given in the text.
15. Wilson Harris, 'The Native Phenomenon', in *COMMON WEALTH*, edited by Anna Rutherford (Aarhus, 1972), p. 148.

JOHN GREEN

## Nadia Answers the Call

Nadia is suddenly awake, uncannily wide awake. She senses everything with sharp and instant clarity. For perhaps a second she compares her sudden jump from the void of a deep and dreamless sleep to this state of alert, with her usual drift out of a warm nothing, into awareness.

She listens carefully, and hears only the night stillness. Everything is absolutely still, as though all the life and movement in the universe has stopped on some invisible order, and must soon, following an unknown cue, burst in an avalanche of tumult. No moreporks. Not even a possum.

Possums still spooked her, to Roger's continuing amusement. They sounded like thoughtful overweight gentlemen as they tromped over the iron roof above the bedroom.

Not tonight though, not even a sighing breeze through the pines.

Little chills like cold fingertips touch her warm spine, wandering up and down. She shivers.

'Somebody walks upon your grave ... somebody walks upon your grave ... somebody walks upon your grave...' intones inside her brain, keeping perfect time with the fluttering chills.

She shivers again and rolls over on her back, flinging her left arm out to the other side of the bed. Roger isn't there. Of course, business in another town. He will be back on Friday. Her hand feels for his place between the sheets. It is unrumpled, crisp and chilly. She arches her back impatiently, pulls the quilt over her head and shuts her eyes tight.

Items to be put on the list for the supermarket. She must remember that because the gas station closes mid-day tomorrow, she will have to fill the car up early. Roger's curriculum vitae has to be typed to go with his job application (he left the letter, signed, with an envelope that's too small, on the shelf by the telephone). Where is he taking her? Does she have to go? She must let Suzie have that moussaka recipe. Type it tomorrow. Is she, Nadia, superficially skating this winter over the thin ice that hides what's underneath, deep? The safe will have to have those soft tomatoes cleaned out, first thing in the morning.

Another little jump and she threshes chilly legs. Ridiculous. She'll never get back to sleep now. Everything's so clear, rushing in. She should really get some paper and write all the things down. She'll never remember them in the morning.

Nadia props herself up on one shoulder, reaches an arm out to the dresser by the bed, and tilts the little clock around, bringing it closer so she can see the glowing cool green hands and figures, glowing and dying, glowing in the chilly still night. It is 3:00 a.m.

Pale white moonlight filters through filmy, almost transparent curtains over the small windows, onto the tall dark wardrobe and the opposite wall.

Why can't she sleep?

Yes, there is a sound, just one. The ticking of the clock.

She lies back again and rolls over to face the wall, staring at the blank darkness, away from distraction. Maybe she will be able to sleep now.

Again those little chills flutter up and down her back: somebody walks upon my grave... somebody walks upon my grave... somebody walks upon my grave... somebody walks upon my grave...

Then, a long way away, the sound of a car or lorry. A real comfort. There IS still a world outside. It drones up and down, up and down, over the hills and down the valleys, gradually coming closer in the chill clear air. Nadia's quick sigh of relief adds to the sound that now breaks the stillness. Relaxed, she turns over onto her other side, confident that she will at last be able to sleep.

The droning solitary engine rises and falls, rises and falls, louder and louder (Nadia can even hear a gear change). It seems to pause and then to come down the hillside, along the road that leads to the drive. Another pause, and mingled low gear engine noises with the crunch and rattle of sharp edged stones. HER drive! Yes, there are dappled flickering lights outside the bedroom window. It sounds like a powerful engine. Another gear change. The gravel noises are so loud and distinct that it must have rounded the sharp turn at the bottom, a hundred yards from the house. The engine is switched off. It might be at the Hargraves — they are only sixty yards through the trees, just off the drive. Distinctive clicks as a car door opens. Clunk. More silence.

The fine hairs on the lower part of Nadia's neck are prickling. Is that her imagination, or can she feel the faint quivering of the long wooden stairway rising up out of the bushes to her front door? The house is slung high in the forest on slender poles and Nadia's often noticed how sensitive they are to the footsteps of visitors. Perhaps she can hear the tread of unhurried feet up the stairs. Can that be the sound of the front door handle turning? It's hard to tell, because the bedroom door is shut and there's a passage down to the front door. She should sneak out and see. Instead, she shudders and pulls the quilt around her ears, tossing her head back on the pillows. Maybe she hears those unhurried steps again along the wooden veranda and back down the stairs to the drive. Thank God she remembered to lock the doors.

The stillness returns to the night. Nadia is twitching under the quilt, feeling cold all over. Is that the rustle of leaves outside her bedroom window?

A moment later she hears, unmistakably, the sound of slow regular steps up to the back door. There can be no doubt — the steps are on the other side of her bedroom wall. They are on the landing, trying the back

door handle. Turning one way, then the other. Did they turn it to the left or to the right? A tug on the handle. Another tug. It rattles. The steps measure their way unhurriedly back down the stairs. Nadia faces the wall. She can hear the rustling of the leaves on the bushes outside her window. She knows there's no breeze. She doesn't want to see a face peering in at her. But how could it? The bedroom is on poles. It's nine feet off the ground. She relaxes.

She hears the solid clunk of a car door. Filled with the belief that whoever it is will go now, she rolls over again and sees the unwinking dapple of lights through the bedroom window, on the bushes outside. She feels cold and damp inside her heavy woollen nightie.

The thud which beats down the moment of silence seems to be somewhere near the front of the house, down by the drive — underneath the veranda perhaps. And another. And another. There's a barely perceptible tremor running along the floor up the legs of the big brass bedstead, shaking Nadia's body with the finest and most exquisitely delicate earthquake, so delicate that she is not quite sure whether it's really happening. But there's no doubt about the thuds. Their tempo is increasing — blow upon blow now raining down upon God knows what defenceless object.

The attack upon the silence of the night advances with the sharper sounds of splintering screeching wood.

Nadia, quivering with fright, is sure she hears hesitant thuds over near the back of the house as well. They seem to hesitate, gather confidence, and find a rhythm of increasing tempo. There are more screeches of agonized wood coming from the front.

She hears a distinctly metallic ring, very close to her, not far from the bedroom window. A scraping noise is followed by a loud thump, thump, thump, — and the room, the bed and dresser begin a St Vitus dance with their own private and continuing earthquake. It goes on and on and on. Nadia is too frightened to move. She sees the clock jumping towards her over the barely visible polished wooden surface of her vibrating dresser. Its cool glowing hands are at precisely 3:30. The palpitating heart against the inside of her ribs seems to be trying to escape from the nightmare reality in which it is helplessly locked. The whole house is shaking, and a mad chorus of mingled thuds, screeches and creaks, mercilessly assaults her anguished ear drums. And she cannot get rid of them even though she now curls into a ball underneath the covers, stuffing the edges of the quilt in her ears.

'I must get a grip on myself', she mutters. 'I must do something. I must

see if the neighbours can hear what's going on.'

The nearest neighbours, the Hargraves are sixty yards away. But they MUST hear, they must.

Without really knowing what she is doing, Nadia throws back the bed-clothes, gets up and creeps quickly across the room to the window. Keeping her face low down by the sill, she peers carefully outside, towards where the Thomas house sprawls among the pine trees. Not a light to be seen. Yet she saw Penny at the dairy late in the afternoon. They MUST be home.

Nine feet below her and on the right, Nadia sees flickering lights and three figures, wearing dark cassocks and big peaked hoods. She can't see their faces. She sees the glint of metal on the axes they swing down, biting, it seems, at something underneath the house.

The POLES. They must be chopping away at the poles, using the headlights of a big car, dimly seen at the end of the drive, by the front steps.

It's a big old limousine.

Nadia opens her mouth. She wants to shriek, but there's something caught in her throat. She can't make a single sound.

A barely perceptible whiff of smoke wanders past her nostrils, a tendril in the car lights. She wants to choke.

With a tremendous effort she breaks away to the bedroom door, which she opens onto the passage. Her feet are chilled by the cold varnish on the bare planks. There are flickering lights reflected on the wall by the front door.

Nadia smells smoke, quite distinctly, and sees delicate whorls like fine gauze veils, floating and twisting in the dim light.

She rushes into the living room and pressing herself against the front wall, carefully peers around the hanging heavy drapes that border the French window. To her horror she sees a figure, darkly cassocked, with its face obscured by a big hood, standing by the big dark polished limousine. It holds two long sticks clamped together at one end around a bundle of flaming rags. They flicker and glow with a brassy hot light, and bits, haloed with blue fire, fall off. Beyond, there is not a neighbour's light to be seen.

The whole living room is shaking. Her favourite ladder-backed chairs are moving towards her like spirits. There is a heavy jolt. Her casket falls from its place on the dresser and breaks into small white pieces on the floor. She stoops to pick them up, stands up, drops the pieces and aghast, sees that a crack has opened up between the ceiling and the left hand

wall. It might be an inch wide. Another jolt, and she thinks she feels the floor boards under the rug sag, bending and groaning. Tears want to flood through her eyes and roll down her damp cold cheeks. But they won't come.

She staggers back to the passage, and down to the stairs to the attic. There she leans against the wall, beating her fists against the stained woodwork, her chest heaving.

She stumbles up the narrow staircase, falling twice, barely aware that she's bruised the front of her right leg and stubbed her toe. The smell of smoke is stronger now.

She clammers into the attic and flings herself across a ribbed, timbered chest, weeping quietly, her body shaking, hearing a crackling, feeling the shaking house. Her vision in the dim cold light is fogged by smoke.

She gets to her feet and feels along the wall for a light switch, sobbing. It clicks, but there's no light.

Her feet moving quickly, Nadia almost falls down the staircase, tripping over the hem of her nightie. The floor of the passage feels warm now and seems to be tilting and crunching. She coughs. Her hand gropes through the smoking night for the phone, on the shelf by the wall. The handpiece is cold, her palm clammy. She kneels on the crazily swaying floor and puts her face, damp and cold, close to the dial. She picks up the handpiece. There is no sound. Frantically she dials. She pushes her long thick hair back with one hand and presses the ear piece hard against her ear. There is no sound, no sound at all.

She sees flames flickering through the junction of the floor boards and the passage walls. Gaps are opening up there, at least three inches wide in places. Puffs of dense smoke are rising through them and the air is foggy. A bronzed, warm glow suffuses the passage. Nadia coughs and the rims of her eyes smart. Her feet are now burning hot, as though she was running across the sand dunes on a summer's day.

As she stumbles back up the twisting passage through the smoke towards the front door, she sees through broken panes at either side, the dim and motionless shape of a cassock and hood, and the metallic shine of an axe blade.

Somewhere behind her and to one side, there's an avalanche of splintering crackling timber.

The cassocked figure raises one arm, framed in sparks and clouds of smoke. It beckons her.

Sobbing and coughing, spangled with sparks, her arms and back burning with tiny pins of fire, Nadia turns, stumbles, then crawls along



the buckling passage towards the back door. In a burst of flames, she sees the phone fall in slow motion off its shelf to the floor. The right hand wall leans out, looming for a second over her, and crashes in fragments, tearing fiery gaps in the wall on the other side.

Nadia shrieks. She turns slowly from the fiery barrier. She is ringed with sparks and haloed in orange swirling smoke. Coughing, she shuffles on burning bare feet, back towards the front door. She sees the darkly cassocked figure moving, and hears the ringing metal axe tearing at the front door. It swings open in a vortex of whirling sparks and smoke. The figure now stands still on the miraculously untouched veranda, the long handled axe cradled on a wide sleeved arm. The other man, unhurried, beckons her. She cannot see the face inside the hood. Beyond, the neighbours houses are all in darkness.

She shuffles through the flaming doorway.

HOWARD McNAUGHTON

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## From Animism to Expressionism in the Early James K. Baxter

The earliest critical writings of James K. Baxter make frequent approving reference to animism as a basis of poetic experience. This tendency reached an extreme with the writing of his first play, *Jack Winter's Dream*, in 1956, after which the term 'animism' virtually disappeared from his critical vocabulary. It will be argued that with *Jack Winter's Dream* Baxter moved from animism to expressionism, the logical source of his major confessional poetry of the 1960s. This transition is particularly important in view of the recent popularity of the play, which in 1979 appeared in a new edition<sup>1</sup> and was released as a feature film.

Baxter was specific about the location of his play in the South Island of New Zealand:

When I was a child I spent a good deal of time in Otago and the Lake district — an area, I suppose, that has come often into my poetry — and this landscape I tried to make come alive, to play its part, animistically, in the story. What I had in mind was somewhere near Naseby, but whether the yarns told me by my father which form a basic stratum in the play were really centred there, I would be unable to say.<sup>2</sup>

Another New Zealand poet had already produced a major animistic treatment of the Central Otago landscape: Alistair Campbell's 'Elegy' (1948) is a response to the death of a young man in the mountains, and Baxter appears to have been the first critic to understand how Campbell's animism worked. In 1950, he wrote:

The most remarkable feature of Mr Campbell's poetry is a passionate sympathy with natural objects which produces at its strongest the effect of genuine animism.<sup>3</sup>

Five years later, he wrote:

Campbell's strongest personal symbols are always of separation and death. In his superb 'Elegy', mountain, gorge, tree, and river, become protagonists in the drama of the death of the young mountaineer. In 'Hut Near Desolated Pines', perhaps his finest poem, he considers the death of an old recluse, the rats, the spiders, the wind which bursts the door open, are all animistic and hostile. The old man himself is on one level the isolated self, on another the bearer of ancestral wisdom.<sup>4</sup>

The similarities between Baxter's favourite poem by Campbell and his own first play are too great to be coincidental. Campbell's old recluse is found dead by a rabbit on the mud floor of his hut; Jack Winter is found dead by two girl hikers inside the ruins of an old pub, 'a house made out of clay'.<sup>5</sup> Even the idea of the dream may be traced to Campbell:

Fantastical images may have stirred  
His mind when the wind moaned  
And sparks leapt up the chimney  
With a roar. But what great gust  
Of the imagination threw wide  
The door and smashed the lamp  
And overturned both table and chair?<sup>6</sup>

It is that 'great gust of the imagination' that Baxter expanded into

dramatic substance for the main body of his play, but whereas the dynamics of hallucination and death in Campbell's poems are alien and inexplicable, in Baxter's play they are generated psychologically and are thus expressionistic.

By 'animism', Baxter clearly meant what philosophers call 'naïve pan-psychism', commonly observed among primitive tribes and children; in 1951, he wrote:

Animism is an essential factor in the artist's view of the world. The generative power of poetry comes largely from the rediscovery and revaluation of childhood experience.... I consider that the animism of the child and savage is an essential ingredient of good poetry.<sup>7</sup>

In Campbell, the environmental antagonists are presented as predatory, autonomous, and unknowable, to the poet as well as to the poetic character. Even 'the imagination', the instrument of the old man's death, is viciously active but utterly inexplicable, a mystery which the poem endorses as a mystery. This poetic method, in which the energy source is extraneous, Baxter correctly termed animistic, and Campbell continued working in this manner until *Sanctuary of Spirits* (1963).

In Baxter's own poetry, the animistic world view only rarely governs a whole poem, and even then it appears as an awkward residue of a childhood vision. 'The Giant's Grave'<sup>8</sup> refers to a deep hole in the Brighton River in Otago, a name which is a simple illustration of childhood animism. In Baxter's poem, however, the grave is associated with specific mythopoetic elements, including allusions to Atlas, Antaeus, and Adam, so that childhood credulity is invalidated beside adult sophistication; the grave is no longer the active menace to youthful canoeists, it is the passive repository of imposed learning. Many of Baxter's poems, from *Beyond the Painsade* (1944) through beyond 'The Waves' (1966), reflect the consciously hopeless attempt to revitalize the animistic Brighton environment; the attempt fails because the poet has verbally and often rationally mastered his environment.

Baxter's animistic interpretations of other New Zealand poets were less cogent than his reading of Alistair Campbell. In particular, he used similar terminology in a 1953 review of Denis Glover's *Arawata Bill*:

The peculiar power of Mr Glover's landscape poetry rises from the fact that mountain, river, bushland and sea assume in it the proportions of animistic powers, and the chief importance of *Arawata Bill* is that it constitutes an extension of this frame of reference.<sup>9</sup>

In the persona of Arawata Bill, Glover created a lens figure who subjectifies any animistic detail and thus nullifies any numerous properties. When a drunk clings to a lamppost because the world is spinning around him, his environment is not animistic but merely a projection of his own mental disorder, a crude form of expressionism.<sup>10</sup> Arawata Bill's vision is governed by a similar dementia; as the barmaid observes, 'the only gold he'll ever pan/ Is the glitter in his eyes'.<sup>11</sup> From the first poem in the sequence, where 'golden nuggets bloom/ In the womb of the storm',<sup>12</sup> to the last, where Bill is informed 'You should have been told/ Only in you was the gold',<sup>13</sup> the natural world is presented as a macrocosmic distortion of the old miner's single-minded pursuit of wealth. In the true animism of Alistair Campbell's early poetry, there is never a simple explanation for 'the womb of the storm'.

The title character of *Jack Winter's Dream* is an amalgam of Arawata Bill, Campbell's old hermit, and a seasonal king, sacrificed in the manner of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. At the start, Winter is introduced by the Narrator in the style (as Baxter acknowledged)<sup>14</sup> of Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood*; Winter enters Abelstown, a ghost town from the gold rush era, and drinks himself to sleep in the ruins of The Drover's Rest. Before the dream begins, Baxter establishes its rationale very clearly through a dialogue between Winter and Bottle, representing the alcoholic factor in him. In expressionist terminology, Bottle may be called the 'control factor', the dramatic mechanism whereby the subconscious processes are released from their realistic container. Bottle speaks in a female voice; Baxter had very little dramatic use for women, but the control factor in his plays and relevant poems is very often female, an antagonistic mother-destroyer figure who pushes the expressionistic reverie into an almost exclusively male world.<sup>15</sup>

Neither Winter nor Bottle actively intrudes into the central dream narrative, although the Narrator frequently reminds us of their presence. The central dramatized story which makes up the dream is a simple tale about Will Trevelyan, travelling through the goldfields in the 1860s with a thousand pounds worth of dust and nuggets, and arriving at The Drover's Rest for the night. He meets Webfoot Charlie (the publican), Jenny (his daughter), and various guests: Preaching Lowry (Scottish), Ballarat Jake (Australian), and an anonymous Dane who does not speak. The naïveté of Trevelyan in talking about his prosperity, coupled with the stark suggestiveness of the ballad poetry, makes it seem inevitable that he will be murdered for his gold. They all go to bed, Trevelyan with Jenny; they talk about marriage, and he has just left her attic when

Charlie cuts his throat, pushes the body downstairs, and puts the razor in the hand of the drunken Dane who is here implicitly identified with Winter. It seems likely that Charlie, who has already hidden the gold will succeed in his villainy; but the dream at this stage fades out into the morning scene, and the discovery of Winter's body by the two girl hikers.

No other figure in the drama is as explicit in its expressionistic function as Bottle; for example, although Baxter thought of Preaching Lowry as 'the conscience of the piece',<sup>36</sup> in his dramatic context he is just another example of fragile humanity. This vagueness was possible because the main interpretative gesture comes through the imagery used by the Narrator for the theme of human frailty. The main action occurs on a 'clay crumbed floor', around which 'wrists of broom heave now at the sundried slabs of clay', an image that is expanded when Winter 'sees time past and time to be, and the heart of man a clay image melting on the palm of God's hand'.<sup>37</sup> The clay symbolism is clear by the time we are told that 'an illumination ... pierces the double night, the house of clay and the house of flesh',<sup>38</sup> and the two story elements, that of Winter and that of his dream, fuse when the Dane 'lies like a second fallen Adam full length on the frosty earth'.<sup>39</sup> The Edenic references are characteristic of Baxter's poetry even before his conversion to Catholicism, and are here heightened by the location of the action in Abelstown; however, the biblical connotations of the clay symbolism are only implicit, so that, as in most of his later plays, the values that are to be attached to the temptation and sacrifice that constitute the essential action are left ambivalent. The ending parallels that of a seminal work of dramatic expressionism, the Capeks' *And So Ad Infinitum*, in which a woodcutter discovers the body of the old tramp whose drunken hallucinations have supplied the central action, but the interpretative precision that is possible in 'the insect play' has no place here. The final comment on the human condition comes from the First Girl: 'Oh Hilda, isn't it quaint? Who'd live in a house made out of clay?'<sup>40</sup> The question is rhetorical: the clay house, the turf hut used by many New Zealand pioneers, is as inevitable a dwelling for Jack Winter, the fallen Adam, as the 'wide open cage' is for the non-drinking alcoholic protagonist of Baxter's first stage play.<sup>41</sup>

Appropriately, the girl finds the clay 'quaint'. For Baxter, human frailty is male territory, to which women are generally insensitive. He entitled his selected poems *The Rock Women*, and used the same image in this play; the images of the clay man and the rock woman are spread throughout his later poetry, several of his stage plays, and his unpub-

lished novel, *A Ghost in Trousers*.<sup>22</sup> Jack Winter's empathy with Will Trevelyan becomes most intense with the appearance of the publican's daughter:

He weeps for the immortal joy of the dead, who has never wept for a living man or woman. The wound of the world's grief opens in the starless grave and ice mountain of his heart; and the tears flow as he listens. From the living light that is, was, and will be, ghosts no longer, the true dead speak.<sup>23</sup>

Only subjectively are the dead 'ghosts no longer'. Winter is himself in the process of becoming a ghost, and the dead are becoming, for him, 'true'. The affinity between Winter's body and the earth which accommodates it is neither a religious mystery nor an animistic world view; it is a psychological ploy directly engineered by the catalyst of the dream, the Mephistophelian Bottle, slowly asking Winter 'Do you want me more than Heaven?'<sup>24</sup>

Jack Winter, like Arawata Bill, is an intermediary lens figure whose potently unreliable perception governs all observed detail within the hallucinatory context, in the manner of traditional psychoexpressionism. The perception of the Narrator, however, is free from the obvious limitations of Winter, although he adopts a sympathetic pose, and this means that the Narrator's observations on the mutability theme are allowed more authority. At the end of the play, Winter's vision has dissolved, the Narrator's stance of objectivity has yielded to the facile irony of the girls, and the absence of an authorial voice means that the play's metaphysical energies are dissipated.

The reconciliation of psychological and environmental energies through an authorial persona was a central preoccupation of Baxter's confessional poetry of the 1960s, and achieves its most elaborate proportions in 'The Waves', the poem with which he ended *The Rock Woman*.<sup>25</sup> In the first section, the socially and sexually disorientated speaker finds consolation on the shore, anthropomorphically conceived; the pubic grass on the arid beach and the wave which 'bangs in channels of gnarled stone' are presented as environmental correlatives to the loss of poetic inspiration. In the central and final sections, the poet gradually accommodates his sexual and metaphysical propensities into the mutability ethos that is epitomized in the waves themselves, and the poem emerges, literally as evidence of that accommodation. The structural pivot of the poem is, however, in the second section, in which the problem of reconciliation is personalized:

The island like an old cleft skull  
With tussock and bone needles on its forehead  
Lives in the world before the settlers came  
With gun and almanac.

One half-mad  
Solitary six-foot fisherman  
Blasted a passage out with gneiss  
Between the shore and the island templebone  
To let his boat come in, changing the drift  
Of water from the bay.<sup>26</sup>

The fisherman may be identified as being responsible for Barney's Island, a promontory stretching into the Brighton Bay which was made a high-water island for fishing purposes. Barney belongs to the heroic world of the local pioneers, and in numerous poems Baxter populated the Brighton Bay with Titans:

The rock limbs of Prometheus  
Lac twisted at the entrance of the bay.<sup>27</sup>

Barney is an example of the Antipodean Titan who manhandles his environment as the miners did in *Jack Winter's Dream*; the 'channels of gnarled stone', engineered by Barney, have now become the irrational boundaries separating the intellect ('an old cleft skull') from the body ('the roots of matted swordgrass'), so that all that is left is 'The strangled weight of sex and intellect'. In the Prometheus poem, Baxter described the pioneers:

they cross the river mouth  
In late evening when sandflies rise  
From rotten kelp. Only a pressure at  
The fences of the mind. From clay mounds they gather  
To share the Titan's blood with us.<sup>28</sup>

The pioneer Titan thus becomes an index to the inadequacy of the living, just as the ghosts of the miners did to Jack Winter; the living, like the mosquitoes, unthinkingly participate in the blood sacrifice of the Titan.

In 'The Waves', Baxter articulated the same themes as in *Jack Winter's Dream*: temptation, sacrifice, mutability, and the magnetic energies of a particular environment. In the poem, however, the themes are confronted without the tangential escape of expressionistic inconsequence. Barney is not allowed a voice because the type is now recognized as illusory: the waves are the ultimate victors over the Titans, and by

exploring the symbolism of their energies Baxter achieved a personal statement of 'the fences of the mind' without affecting a return to childhood animism.

#### NOTES

1. James K. Baxter, *Jack Winter's Dream* (Wellington: Price Milburn for the Victoria University Press, 1979).
2. Baxter, 'Jack Winter's Dream', *New Zealand Listener*, 19 September 1958, p. 8. With the exception of this article, all of Baxter's critical writings referred to below have been collected in *James K. Baxter as Critic*, ed. Frank McKay (Auckland: Heinemann, 1978).
3. Baxter, review of *Mine Eyes Dazzle* by Alastair Campbell, *New Zealand Listener*, 8 September 1950, p. 12.
4. Baxter, *The Fire and the Anvil* (Wellington: New Zealand University Press, 1955), p. 63.
5. Baxter, 'Jack Winter's Dream', *Landfall* X, 3, 1956, p. 193. All references are to this text.
6. Alastair Campbell, *Kapiti* (Christchurch: Pegasus Press, 1972), p. 13.
7. Baxter, *Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry* (Christchurch: Carson Press, 1961), pp. 7, 19.
8. Baxter, *House of Bridge and Other Poems* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 20.
9. Baxter, review of *Anonymous Ball* by Denis Glover, *Landfall* VII, 3, 1953, p. 215.
10. To Freud, of course, such expressionism was a precondition of animism. See *Totem and Taboo*, Chapter 3.
11. Denis Glover, *Enter without Knocking* (Christchurch: Pegasus Press, 1964), p. 89.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
14. In his *New Zealand Listener* article on the play (see Note 2), Baxter also stated that his use of a narrator was influenced by Laurie Lee's *The Voyage of Mayhew*. No other parallels are apparent.
15. This is most blatant in a poem such as 'Henley Pub', in *The Back Woman* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 59.
16. Baxter stated this in his *New Zealand Listener* article (see Note 2).
17. Baxter, 'Jack Winter's Dream', pp. 183, 183.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
21. 'The Wide Open Cage' is included in *Contemporary New Zealand Plays*, ed. McNaughton (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1974).
22. Manuscripts are held in the Hocken Library, Dunedin.
23. Baxter, 'Jack Winter's Dream', p. 189.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 162.



2.5. Baxter, *The Rock Woman*, pp. 83-6.

2.6. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

2.7. Baxter, *The Man on the Horse* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1967), p. 154 (unfiled poem).

2.8. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

MICHAEL MORRISSEY

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## The Letter, Bells, Creeping Boys

He sits in the square surrounded by bells.  
The sound of bells. Not real bells.  
There is a girl sitting on a bench.  
A green bench, chipped, with the initials of other lovers carved into it.  
Four small boys.  
The girl is writing a letter.  
The girl glances up from writing the letter.  
She is smiling.  
He thinks: she is writing a love letter.  
The boys creep past on the girl's side of the wall.  
She sees them creeping past.  
They are following a policeman on the other side of the wall.  
She does not reach the conclusion they are following a policeman — she  
has not looked up from her letter which has caused her to smile. She has  
no awareness that the policeman exists. Yet she has seen the creeping  
boys. The creeping boys.  
The policeman keeps walking.  
He has not noticed the girl writing her letter — again she looks up and  
smiles — nor has he noticed the creeping boys. The creeping boys.  
The policeman keeps walking. He too is surrounded by bells.  
Even the creeping boys are surrounded by bells.  
And the girl — she too is surrounded by bells.  
By the bells.

He is watching the girl, impatiently now.

He wants to speak.

He wants to wrench the letter from her, involve her in some way, some witty remark which will prove irresistible — he wants — to pick her up — he wants her to be the ideal woman, for whom he has been looking. If only the bells would stop.

It's hard to talk above the bells.

To exchange witty banter, one has to shout above the creeping bells — who said the bells are creeping? — the boys, yes, the boys creep but the bells do not creep.

The creeping bells.

He wants to creep over the top of or under the bells.

Ah that's why the bells started creeping — he was thinking of creeping under or through the bells — that's why the bells started creeping, along with the boys.

He wants to get through the — bells — the sound of the bells — get through to her —

'You must have written a novel by now.'

If she looks blank he can say, 'The bells are loud aren't they?'

She will understand that even if she doesn't understand about the novel.

'Dear X, she will write, this man came up to me in the middle of the bells and started talking about novels I thought he was mad.'

'Mad am I, can't you understand anything, you never stopped writing your letter and you were smiling I knew you must be entering into intercourse with someone, your brain wasn't totally belled, a sort of neologism here, if you will excuse, the din, the sin, of making a few meanings of my own, after all that is what we are here for, isn't it, to resist the given, the religious musak those damn bells are giving us — I don't know what those boys are up to by now — probably finished with their damn creeping, the policeman doesn't look like a transcendental meditator that's for sure/real if you like — he looks like an adonis who's had a lobotomy I don't mean to be smart lady snatching your letter away but I am the GREAT LETTER SNATCHER from way back, 'never could resist interfering with a message in mid-bells — now who pulled yours? — No not yours officer! That man, is obviously out to spoil everyone's including yours and mine dear, the fun we're going to have when I snatch your damn panty hose down and pull them over your head — I say we seem to have got mixed up there hardly surprising with those damn bells — God they've stopped.

I say, they've stopped.

They're lovely aren't they?  
Yes, lovely. Are you writing a letter?  
No I'm trimming a dinosaur's toenail.  
Ha ha. Is it difficult — writing a letter?  
No, dead easy — (don't get upright about the word dead we all have to face up to it sooner or later) — it's the dinosaur's toenail that's difficult.  
Writing to your family?  
I don't believe you've heard a word I've said.  
It was the bells — damn they've started again.  
And back comes the policeman!  
Back come the creeping boys!  
The whole damn thing is starting all over!  
She's sniffling into her letter again.  
The boys are creeping again.  
The policeman is — no, he's coming down on the boys' side of the wall!  
That will stop their damn creeping!  
(It won't stop the bells though)  
Is that a love letter you're writing?  
Love letter?  
To the one — that you love.  
We have to face up to that word sooner or later. Better sooner.  
In the case of love.  
In the case of death — excuse me officer are you on this case?  
What case?  
(OFF) The death case. The creeping boys case.  
*The case of the creeping bells*  
Bells do not creep!  
Creeping boys — are we dealing with an imbecile, some kind of diabetic or something?  
If I'm going to deal with an imbecile at least make sure that he has enough sugar in his bloodstream!  
Policemen look younger than they used, they creep round like bells — boys! — they creep like boys — they don't have eyes in the back of their heads anymore — they're McLuhan's men — and they have all that sugar in their bloodstream — how many creeping diabetic bell-happy policemen have you seen during your letter you smug little —  
I have to warn you that any bell — any bell you ring will be clattered in evidence against you. Yes you, the great letter snatcher from way back.  
Haven't you finished your letter yet?  
A Russian novel. Yes one page, two pages — but this is an epic.

Did you know that postage has gone up and it's going up again?  
That's why the bells are creeping — ringing! Requiem for your Russian  
novel. Requiem for love letters to diabetic imbeciles on the other side of  
the goddamn globe.  
A totally soundless letter you're writing  
Nothing in it but words.  
And don't you realize you diabetic imbecilic bitch that anything that  
doesn't move today is a failure?  
All communication must have a kinetic quality.  
Otherwise it does not move.  
This page is a failure. Your letter is a failure.  
By this definition.  
As your letter is a definition of where you are.  
But you don't seem to know where you are!  
You're hemmed in by bells!  
Can't you hear them?  
Can't you hear them?

MICHAEL SHARKEY

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## Gypsies, City Streets: Four New Zealand Poets on the Road

This brief review of four New Zealand 'road' poets suggests something of a phenomenon of the seventies, a hangover from an earlier 'beat' period, which infused New Zealand poetry with a new sense of mobility and openness that owed a deal to the social and political movements of the time as much as to consciously-derived literary models. The work of

Gary McCormick, Sam Hunt, Peter Olds and Jon Benson is not uniformly concerned with travelling, but all these writers deal with images of transience, travel, or a trip, to infer relationships with persons, society and art. Nor are they the only contemporary writers in New Zealand to concern themselves with 'travel' sequences (even travelogues). Alan Brunton ('Letter to Harry Leeds', *New Argos*, May 1975, pp. 5-6) and Russell Haley (*On the Fault Line*, Paraparaumu, Hawk Press, 1977) explore distance, separation, and perception in their work generally, and James K. Baxter's own observations on travelling up and down New Zealand — including hitch-hiking scenes — may be considered a formative (and even normative) instance of the mode. Associated with the general thematic area are the public stances of these poets — the images of street-dweller, 'gypsy', hobo or peripatetic boozier (Sam Hunt).

The deliberate adoption of a 'pose' goes beyond a fashion or passing trend, to mark the output of these four in particular ways as an experimental direction in New Zealand poetry. In effect, they represent a casting-off from more static modes, into an anti-academic contemplation of landscape, society, and self. And in the case of at least two of the writers, a conscious grandstanding element signifies their relationship with the public. Their work is 'public' by contrivance — their audiences being drawn from the street or pub, or revamped 'readings' that take on theatrical aspects with the arrival of Hunt or McCormick. Declamation, in their case, is the point.

McCormick's second collection *Street Poems and a Walking Story* (Porirua, Piano Publishing, n.d.), a collection of broadsheet-style pamphlets, commences with a neat encapsulation of the dichotomies relating to poetry. 'There are Two Kinds of Poem' differentiates the 'academic' poem and the 'street' poem:

the one

is a genius in technique, it whirls with precision  
across the stage and leaps before firing  
in libraries; familiar with college campuses and  
assisted by the Arts Council, it goes on tour  
in the provinces

lives on in books few care to read.

This 'type' has a solid pedigree; a considerable number of contemporary practitioners are campus-located or patronized, including C. K. Stead,

Vincent O'Sullivan, Kendrick Smithyman, M. K. Joseph, Mike Doyle, and others from the Oxford/Auckland University Press stable. Nor is this 'generation' of academic poets wholly separate by age from the generation of Hunt and McCormick. Hunt and Olds, like Mike Morrissey (*Make Love in All the Rooms*, Dunedin, Caveman Press, 1978) and other more recent writers, have served terms as writer-in-residence (Burns Fellow, Otago University, 1977, 78). McCormick is right, however, to point up the pitfalls of achieving 'genius in technique', in terms of the poet's relationship to a wide public base. Transcending Smithyman's delineations of Auckland versus Wellington poetry at an earlier period (*A Way of Saying: A Study of New Zealand Poetry*, Auckland, Collins, 1963), the 'academic' poet — like Smithyman at Auckland, or Bill Manhire in the south — is drier, trickier, more hung up on its recognition that it plays with concepts. Smithyman observed that academic poetry (the poetry of academics, or fostered in the atmosphere of analytics, contemplation)

exploits tone and calls for nuance as our romantic writing was little urged to do, (and) makes for itself a recurring difficulty about getting 'the true voice of feeling' which waits on one's efforts to keep a tactful poise between the pleasures of intellect which may be offered, and those staple excitements of poetry which tend to be sentient... (*A Way of Saying*, p. 155)

The very language is guarded, to weigh 'those staple excitements ... which tend to be sentient'. McCormick considers the other side of the metronome:

Another is more stubborn. By nature, a more erratic lover, coming occasionally like a brilliant sun from behind clouds, recording no apology it speaks out of turn or like a dumb midshipman on holiday stares cheekily out from the expensive arate.

It knows no life other than the brawling street and refuses to come in.

More jocularly metaphysical than the 'technical' poem that McCormick infers in his description of the academic impulse, the more plebeian, 'romantic' poem mimics with its images the differences in sentiment and tone. The entire poem ironically takes off the academic tropes it describes — the poem as skilled actor or action, the 'tourist' in provinces — and contrasts the career-traveller, the vocational midshipman, inferring love

as motive and an uncontrollable impulse to speak out. The 'new' Romance, in short, is announced at the start of McCormick's collection.

The poems move through various styles and topics: in each case, the street is referential. In 'What of the Day's Possible Alternatives', courses of action are considered:

suspended like a bird  
Between two seasons, going this way

And now that, exhausted, I crouch on city pavements,  
Hoping the clatter of hurrying footsteps  
Will drown the quiet of my own indecision.

McCormick is not imprecise about the resolution of indecision concerning direction however: poetry is the total commitment that ensures a kind of immortality, a confirmation that a 'right' decision has been made. A long poem, 'The Rope', from the third sheet in the collection cuts through a catalogue of turnings and twistings through social small-talk and occasions, to remark

My religion, if you like, consists of the worship  
of the purely temporal, which I choose to adore,  
(in all its uncertainty).

This avowal is not a fatalistic embracing of Negative Capability, but a vehicle for continued travel. The second broadsheet includes a poem 'In Certain Seasons', where present emptiness ('Unrequited love' is equivalent in this poem with 'life in all its passages') resolves into inclusion in a perceived larger chaos:

one day oceans must  
swallow rivers, one day the bird  
plunges, freed from the storm.

Often in McCormick's tone there is an uneasy balance between acceptance of this chaotic principle and incipient alarm at personal extinction. On the whole, however, the balance is maintained by a continuing interest in 'possibilities', a curiosity concerning choices. 'The Rope' succinctly captures this mood: 'My life is nothing more or less than one/ of a number of possible choices'.

This almost-acceptance of chance is accompanied by residual doubts, at the least. The undertow of personal uncertainty is suggested in 'Naked

and *Nameless*', with its wish or hope

I may become  
the very spirit of a tree,  
Tall, but  
no longer alone.

The elegiac possibility of much of McCormick's earlier collection (*Gypsies*, with Jon Benson, Piano Publishing, Gisborne, n.d.) is suggested again in *Naked and Nameless*, in poems like 'The Declining Passions of Autumn'

Sighing, sighing,  
the pain-tinged leaves of old passion  
and memories decaying

and 'Remember February', with its gentle musing upon self-annihilation:

such times as these  
men murder themselves  
and have much to gain.

The sadness or nostalgia is linked more with love in the later collection however. Where *Gypsies* struck some strident, even eldritch notes with poems treating with disappointment ('You Never Know' works uneasily through some bitter clichés dealing with bourgeois life and is fairly unresolved) the later works are more assured, and the irony is a product of a cooler hesitation, rather than the disillusion with realities that tinged the first collection. The 'public' works in *Gypsies* in particular sound echoes of the Baxter of *Ode to Auckland* (1972) or of the unrebated satires in *The Holy Life and Death of Concrete Grady* (Ed. J.E. Weir, Wellington, Oxford U.P., 1976), works like 'Ballade of a Happy Bureaucrat' or 'Spring Song of a Civil Servant'. McCormick recounts, in 'The Mall Christmas', the domestic sleaze that designates, not what Baxter might have called acidic, or torpor, apathy, but the designs of capitalism:

The men who sell the Birth of Christ  
Are not aware of what they do.  
Just thankful for the poor and simple, who  
Will buy the plastics in the mart  
The clothes and toys that fall apart  
And keep the bloody wheels of commerce  
Turning.



This directness is gravitated against by the polemic uns subtlety — the poem might make tolerable propaganda were it not for the monotone dimension of the analysis, or the reliance on clichés relating to the sacred and the profane. More successful among the earlier works were the love-relative poems in the Thunderclouds section, where the slickness of the 'easy' political and social comment pieces is abated by some restraining of an impulse to be disappointed. Tolerance of transience denotes the love-lyrics:

Mean well, be well  
we have not long,  
much me ...  
we thread the needle and are gone ('Thunderclouds I')

An introductory note to McCormick's poems in *Gypsies* acknowledges Sam Hunt's 'older poet' status. Calling his works 'Roadsongs' after Hunt's usage (in his 1973 volume *South Into Winter*, Wellington, Alister Taylor) McCormick notes 'Road is of symbolic importance to this mobile generation. Song has no pretensions about it'. If the poems of *Gypsies* reflected more of the turmoil experienced by the poet in 1973-4 as he claimed in the introduction, then the works in *Naked and Nameless* mark a maturing into capability for handling the uncertainties of the following year or two in a more concise and effective manner. At the same time, they denote a 'found' direction to pursue, in experimenting after romantic models, including the love-lyrics of Sam Hunt, that argue for a sort of resignation to the limits of effectual behaviour.

Sam Hunt's considerable opus since *Beachen Country* (Wellington, Glenbervie Press, 1971) includes two collections that play with the notion of the road (*South Into Winter*, and *Time to Ride*, Waiura, Alister Taylor, 1975) and two volumes that ostensibly celebrate a preoccupation with alcohol, *Bottle Creek* (Waiura, Alister Taylor, 1972) and *Drunkard's Garden* (Wellington, Hampson Hunt, 1977). Hunt's lyrical capabilities have been remarked on in the early seventies, by Peter Crisp (Review of *South Into Winter*, *Landfall* 109, March 1974, pp. 74-9) and Trevor Reeves ('Recent New Zealand Writing', *Ariel*, Vol. 5, No. 3, July 1974, pp. 30-1), among others. Crisp points to Hunt's simplicity, or economy of style — his recounting of 'freshly familiar territory' (the localities, or landscapes of his verse) with a willingness 'to keep his sticky inner paws of afterthought and metaphor off it' (p. 77). Reeves observes in his brief mention that Hunt 'is reluctant to write more personally about himself, but this may eventually come' (p. 30).

Both views are illuminating. Crisp's picture of what is happening in Hunt's early poems suggests that it is predominantly imagistic, or that it works best where sensory triggers engage the reader in the trip (as Reeves observes, Hunt is 'probably New Zealand's first genuine «roving poet», p. 30). And in fact, much of Hunt's verse is reportage from the seen (and scene). What he tells us of himself is in fact inferential much of the time, but the preoccupations are evident, from the very choice of material described. They are not only 'booze, women, wine, women, and song (in that order)' as Reeves suggests (with the occasional dog thrown in, or a word on pollution). Hunt's love-poems (concerning booze or women, or dogs) are not dismissive or cavalier. His 'props' or set-pieces involve Romantic escape as much as bemused toying and dissipation. The dissolution offered by the bottle — or love — is a proper concern of poetry and carries a kosher benediction. As Crisp remarks, Hunt's poetry evokes an 'affectionate' feeling — of recognition of situations, without excessive commentary. Reeves takes exception also to Hunt's general philosophical 'lightness', comparing him to James K. Baxter, and this appears inappropriate, given the ostensible mythopoetizing tendency of the 'legendary Jim' and the more elusive *nebari* *clar* of the contemporary Hunt. Whatever the faults of Hunt's work, it is not arcane or 'private' in the way that much of Baxter's self-created woeful enmeshings in theology suggest.

In a sense, Hunt's economy derives from the transience of 'roving'; the poems are mimetic to the extent that they record brief encounters, and become 'moving' pieces themselves. The metaphor of travel works throughout Hunt's work, to suggest an overall sense of nostalgia for places and persons visited: the depth is fathomless, but contained within the image of motion. The spider spinning in a 'seaward window' (in 'Four Cobweb Poems', *South Into Winter* 2) is destroyed by a visiting girl 'spinning faster than a cobwebbed fly', and the tenuous relationship of poet, spider and fly becomes paralleled and parabolic, to suggest a diversity of readings concerning not sexuality, but existence. The flippant tone of the poem ('So this, friends, this is the last bright cobweb poem!') rings down a veiled finality and offers a lever into Hunt's particular concern for the imagery of wine or beer, or further travel.

Hunt offers many such vignettes as the spider sequence — poems that suggest intensity of watching ('Smash (for Meg)' in Book Four of *Bottle Creek*, for instance) or reflection ('Herons, Ma, Bright Spinnakers' from *Time to Ride*, p. 34, a vision of death, 'My mother, crying as she dies'). Each experience is archetypal; without recourse to mythic names and

precursors, each of Hunt's occasions become a type of epic of its sort, domestically-curtailed in the case of moths attempting to enter a crack in a window, or conflated to embrace all occasions in 'Everytime it rains like this' (*Time is Risk*, p. 17):

Everytime it rains like this:  
I walk hangover beaches, make  
no more sense of it:  
in love with a winter woman,  
a woman when she steams, I kiss  
wet winter lips, return to you

Everytime it rains like this

The separateness of lovers, as well as their inclusion in the couple is an endless fascination for Hunt, moving through versions like this, of the 'whole/ wide world of our bay (...) given in' to clearer statement in 'Words on a First Waking':

And so, you drift from sleep

you dress. Deliberate; beautiful,  
as if you had a wardrobe full —  
the same tight jeans and shirt you threw on  
yesterday. To think us strangers then.

all lovers like to think they're not/  
It's your world, love. You wander out  
alone into the living room,  
alone into another dream. (*Drunkard's Garden*, p. 10)

Not the least of Hunt's appeal is in his gracefulness with rhymes and half-rhymes; throughout *Drunkard's Garden*, an effortless handling of common situations (apparently) veils a tendency to melancholy that is suppressed in order to appear controllable in poetry: 'Those Eyes, Such Mist' for example holds in check a situation that recalls 'Everytime it rains like this':

I dream of the several men who've  
sailed seven seas; their many masts;  
  
wake again to your love  
as thick dreams clear; a dream of masts,

a dream that no man ever  
saw your eyes like this.

I have lost all voice. I kiss  
those eyes, our voyaging; such mist. (*Drunkard's Garden*, p. 12)

The voyaging, the travelling, becomes another metaphor effectively for a state of controlled uncertainty. The illusion of control is served by motion, by continual mobility, experimental startings-out, and observations of the other things in motion also — humans, animals, birds, insects, to suggest a confirmation of the principle of journeying and flight. The title poem of *Drunkard's Garden* brings the elements together:

This overgrown acre,  
full of emptiness, Darkie!  
a headland, refuge for  
the heron, roan and wild  
duck and drunkard; lover, child. (p. 22)

This brief, tight lyric that is ostensibly autobiographical expands through a series of suggestions in the manner of a Baxter 'metaphysical' work, to embrace notions of a Waste Land, and the poem's (headland) promontory into the dark, a place that reconciles the poet and his familiar emblems, loved ones — in a word, the poet's world, reconstituted against all possible ruin. The poem as a tenement is perhaps a logical conclusion to a series of pitstops and roadhouses, and is a neat resolution of Hunt's peripatetic considerations: a place to pause a while in (or forever) to take account of the trip so far.

Jon Benson's contributions to the *Cyprian* volume are marked by an adolescent urgency that is similar to McCormick's. A sort of pop lyricism is derived to account for some observations (for example 'Sarah' recalls Dylan's poem of the same name) and Benson warns in his Foreword against looking for 'continuity'. The poem 'The Road' offers some way into his perceptions however:

This morning  
a chance renewed.  
The road, washed  
By a night's heavy dew,  
Clean,  
Winding in the trees  
and hills,  
Following the river.

...

I'm following the river  
Although I cannot see it,  
Glimpses in the mist,  
And I hear it singing,  
It beckons all to follow  
With melodies from the source.

The gaucheries derive chiefly from the experimenting with other people's clichés, not merely of speech, but of situations. Thus 'Late Afternoon Epilogue' constructs a contemporary Last Supper of sandwich, fruit and bread and water, and dissipates its clarity. 'Harbours' compares a lady to a harbour, and ultimately treads an almost embarrassingly hackneyed line:

Sun-crazed and mightily drunk,  
I've run before the moods of night,  
To beach finally on rocky coast  
for want of, just one guiding light.

In direct contrast to McCormick and Hunt, particularly McCormick's later work, Benson's lyrics are banal and contrived. A sense of personal disaster pervades 'Execution' and 'Another Loser Leaves Town', where the travel image is epitomized in the decision to quit and move on. The dramatic attempt to impose some direction upon things in poetry patently fails, and the option to quit becomes another piece of the grand-standing that marks the entire opus.

Arthur Baysting commenced a review of Peter Olds's first volume, *Lady Mers Revised* (Dunedin, Caveman, 1972) with the disparaging comments 'First off, he's a better poet than he is an illustrator. But he is a poet' (*Langfall*, 108, December 1973, p. 357). Baysting allowed that Olds's 'tone is authentic, the style and rhythm assured, and the better poems are bursting with vitality' (*op. cit.*). The image Olds presented was 'late-fifties punk', and his images recalled 'the hodge/auto-erotic/fifties' together with 'pill bottles, probation officers and paranoia'. Literary style recalled Ginsberg for Baysting, notably in a poem called 'In Auckland', where Ginsberg's 'habit of verbal over-kill' rather than 'paring-down and sharpening of the vision' impaired the work.

For all that, Olds's talent is a persistent one. Almost as prolific as Sam Hunt, his contemporary, Olds has produced subsequently *4 V8 Poems* (1972), *The Snow @ the Glass Window* (1973), *Fremley* (1974) and *Doctor's Rock* (1976), all from Caveman Press, Dunedin. And the themes are consistent throughout this period — poems concerning the hidden structures

of free-form existence, with the accoutrements of urban dwelling in crammed tenements, suicide and drugs and cars, the open road: escape routes that become a viable metaphor for the poetic art, and offer alternatives to dwelling in the psychosis-inducing city.

The first volume served notice of the parameters of the situation: commencing with 'On Probation', the experiences moved through psychosis and jail to 'habits' and, finally, the 'Schizophrenic Highway' and 'In Auckland'. The round trip was, as Baysting suggests, essentially rewarding. 'On Probation' sets the patterns up, as the poet,

Like a Ponsonby native  
that can't escape  
from his neglected monument

goes through the 'shiftless' ritual of progress to the courthouse and out into the boarding house world of barbiturates, late bars, and decay — a 'smelly dungeon'. Protest, and escape (in wine, or drugs, or the 'dreams' that are poems) are the options to acceptance, and Olds reveals them to be essentially mutually-supportive. Halfway through the work, Olds comments 'I put another piece in the allnight jukebox/ and I cry why?' — a question that remains throughout the entire volume, as the poem concludes 'while another piece drops in the allnight/ jukebox'. With this overview of the city's attractions, it is ironic to follow the option offered by going on the road. 'Herne Bay Revisited' catalogues the 'unchangeable Ponsonby', Auckland's inner suburban area, to suggest there is 'Not a ghost of a V8/ Not a ghost of you' (p. 15) left in the city, as Olds sets off from the scene with

Dunedin  
I'm on my way —  
on my way  
hitching.

There is genuine nostalgia in the recurrent imagery of the V8 car in these early poems, and later, in *Freeway*, Olds wheels out a 'V8 Poem for Christ Howard':

Take off, brother, but please return —  
best that the parts be not than bent.  
Come back, broken nose, plucked eye & all,  
better that, brother, than a black-&-red wreck —

*Not a quarrel, as we would want it.*  
*Not a blaring death, as we would dream it* (p. 47)

In the same poem, the metaphors come clearer:

'Tonight I sit in a coal-fired room  
captain of my own foaming 4-wheeled brain  
trying to write a line for you  
while ghosts of Fords ramble across the gloom.'

The unrespectable hot cars in the city's quiet areas and/or in the crash-pad zones of the early seventies, late sixties, and beyond in time epitomize a tenuous relationship with the realities of the present. Olds's poems dealing with the counter- or alternative societies and cultures that he moves through, in experimental searching, image a longing for escape.

The Mandrax poems, like the 'nineteen fifties revisited' works ('A Teenage Problem', 'A 50s Schoolboy Remembers' or 'Lady Lust Revisiting the Great Psychiatric Rock & Roll Nostalgia' — *Doctor's Rock*) represent a retreat into a more controllable world of the imagination than the present seems to offer, with — or despite — the attractions of its 'replacements' for that which has been lost. The second work in *Doctor's Rock*, 'To the End of the White Lady Picnic & Hamburger Joint' sums up Olds's essentially nostalgic and elegiac characteristics: the glory of James Dean era has departed, and Olds feels regret more than savagery at its departure. His work is a record of its features, and his satires are less stagey and rhetorical than McCormick's structured efforts, in their comparing of the old and the new:

Now, walking through

Broadway midafternoon buzzrush &  
Samson women big bags & bellies, I

notice the absence of the '46 soda  
joint fountain, I walk into a pub.

The barman tells me they ripped out  
the joint's tap burgers & hits for a new

carpark yard — he added the con-  
tractors need some concrete mures — I

walk back out to the street & home.  
A bit sad, I turned onto Hauraki late  
  
night service to hear some music  
but picked up the White Lady instead  
  
singing a commercial — (p. 12)

There is no retreat from the present, except in Olds's own attempts to reconstruct the past, familiar icons, and to soften shocks by recourse to the 'drug', poetry, pre-empting the psychosis resulting from destruction of a world that is gone in every sense.

In *Doctor's Rock* Olds follows up another road — the growth of self-reliance as the props run out. The 'Hemi' Baxter New Jerusalem — the extended crashpad family scene of Hiruharama — is acknowledged to have passed in '4 Notes. Jim Baxter One Year Gone', with its restrained conclusion 'They buried the old man a year ago —/ the eels don't bite so much now'. In this poem also, the control of form is most notable in the paired-lines (after Baxter's *Jerusalem Sonnets* maybe). The volume ends with a similarly pared-down summation of the city life, where the picture comes 'clear & true./ well framed, well bunZ, & all of you' (p. 49) and a wry dialogue interlaced with narrative, describing the 'wandering wind's sinister return' (p. 50). The 'wind' — of romantic imagination, of dreams, images Olds's fundamental Romanticism. The 'heroes' in his mythology are James Dean, Little Richard, and the V8 engines out of a transposed American Dream.

In an interview with Stephen Higginson (*Pilgrims*, 4, October 1977), Olds suggests some of his directions in discussing the American presence in his work. Replying to Higginson's question 'Is there any single poet/writer/movement which has provided you with anything in particular? Interests you now?' Olds speculated

I could mention a few American 'beat' poets that have been important to me (not the *Black Mountain* thing) ... guys like Kerouac, William Sappington, D.J. Burger ... Little Richard (movement), John Lennon (poet), Bob Dylan (circus), Bernard Malamud (short stories), Alan Ginsberg (confusion). (p. 135)

Olds also mentions Steinbeck, James Baldwin, Jack London, rounding his remarks off ironically in confirmation with his theme of 'confusion', 'I hope I can learn something from what I've just said. I'm not in Ward 10 for the money, you know'. It is significant that the predominant number of writers he mentions have been or are metropolitan writers and resi-



dents, and that the Road has served to represent a hope for escape or involvement, in the interpretations of London or Kerouac.

The 'transcendental' or religious possibilities of the Road are also present in Olds's readings of experience. Olds recalls Baxter's influence upon him 'I think he paid more attention to me than I did to him. He affected me terribly. I thought I should give up writing and become a monk' (p. 133 — in his interview with Higginson, and he observes that he had Christianity in mind when he wrote some of the reminiscential poems for his father in *Doctor's Rock* — muted lyrics like 'Memories of a Town Drunk', where the death of the worrying ('kicking stones with Mister Kent/ was evil') town drunk provokes an 'At last he's gone — thank God' from the townspeople and a continuation of routine. Such a subtle inference exists in the departure of the 'Town Drunk' that the effective shift from straight narrative to delivery of the 'point' of the poem is contained in the act of telling itself. The form is that of the pruned-down short story — a style of writing that Olds observed he hoped to concentrate upon during the tenure of his mini-Burns Fellowship at Otago in 1978. In a disingenuous dismissal, he remarked 'I've already had a lash at it and I reckon I can handle her with a bit of luck or with the love of Mike'. The themes again, he summarizes, are 'love, hate, baked-beans, pistons, courtrooms, hospitals, sneakers, cops and cars' (p. 135).

It is this openness in Olds's poetry relating to intent — a common trait with several of his progenitors and contemporaries on the American scene, that gives Olds's poetry its particular appeal. In the poem 'The Snow and the Glass Window', from the volume of the same name, Olds offers us in effect a catalogue of banal circumstance, within which 'the boy', his protagonist, considers 'I must break out', — and on gaining access to the world 'outside' discovers 'The glass window remained'. The breaking of the glass (almost predictably) by physical as well as mental efforts, coincides with the end of the poem. The limits of the Romantic search, as in Keats's *Hyperion* poems take the poet to the edge of his art, where realities collide, and dualism is resolved.<sup>1</sup> Olds plainly knows what he is about, in terminating the volume with this poem, and the neatness of his infusion of 'elemental' questions into the record of a mundane existence ('«What have you lost?» boomed/ the sky') suggests his art can be easily overrated. It is every bit worth investigating for its critical exploration of the unresolved dilemmas in contemporary post Romantic poetry. Confronting a problem that is essentially linguistic — the language of 'poetry' and its relationship to other realities, Olds effectively overthrows the distinctions to establish the 'new' limits of art — its

relationship to its society, the poet's culture. At the same time he indicates his concerns are more purely 'conceptual' than Hunt and McCormick, and that his primary interest is to overhaul the art itself, by solidly rooting it in his own instinctual perceptions.

#### NOTE

1. The American critic Ben L. Hunt, reviewing Olde's *P8 Poems* (*Second Coming*, Vol. 3, No. 1 & 2, 1974, *Special New Zealand Anthology*) commented on Olde's 'power' in poems where 'something more than simple nostalgia makes him take these backward looks at what may have been better times' (p. 98). And despite misgivings by reviewers Paul Foreman (pp. 94-5) and William Wantling (pp. 89-91) discussing *Lady Mary Remov'd*, there is general agreement with Tom Montag's view (relating to *The Snow and the Glass Windows*) that 'When Olde is successful, he is powerful' (p. 115).

## In the Next Issue:

*Fiction:* John Clanchy, Cyril Dabydeen, Yvonne du Fresne.

*Poetry:* Frank Chipasula, Bernard Whiting.

*Articles:* Blaise N. Machila, 'Ambiguity in Achebe's *Arrow of God*'; Felix Mnthali, 'Continuity and Change in Conrad and Ngugi'; Sven Poulsen, 'African History: from a European to an African point of view'; Mark O'Connor, 'Vernacular and Middle Styles in Australian Poetry'; Bruce Clunies Ross, 'The Jindyworobaks'.

*Interviews:* Buchi Emecheta, David Ireland.



Christchurch — town centre. Photo: Armand Perot



New Zealand scene. Photo. Armand Petré

## The Human and the Divine: *Fragments* and *Why Are We So Blest?*

Armah's second and third novels, *Fragments*<sup>1</sup> and *Why Are We So Blest?*,<sup>2</sup> are essentially statements about the alienation of the educated élite from the people, and the sense of dissociation and personal dissolution which this induces in those of the élite who feel that their place is among the people. *Fragments* and *Why Are We So Blest?* are both strongly influenced by Fanon's study of the psychology of the African bourgeoisie and of the process by which the colonial power attracts the aspirations of the bourgeois.<sup>3</sup> Both novels are studies of men who have recognized the fatal nature of the processes acting upon them, but been unable to escape the psychological dissolution which comes with their realization of the futility of any gesture in another direction. *Why Are We So Blest?* goes further, to explore the place of the intellectual in the African revolution, and reaches a somewhat ambiguous conclusion.

Armah's first novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*,<sup>4</sup> had also examined the post-colonial situation in Africa, and it has been noted that the imagery of *The Beautiful Ones* is reminiscent of turns of phrase found in the political writing of Fanon.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, Armah's treatment of the black/white men, the members of the new black élite who ape their former colonial masters, resembles Fanon's observations of the behaviour of the colonized black bourgeoisie.

*Fragments* picks up many of the ideas of *The Beautiful Ones*, and some of the images in which these ideas are expressed are the same.<sup>6</sup> As in *The Beautiful Ones*, the novel focuses on a man's refusal to tread the dishonourable path which would give his family the material things they desire, and again his refusal seems to make him abnormal in the eyes of others and even to himself. In the second novel, *Fragments*, Baako's assumption of guilt for his refusal to behave in the normal, acquisitive way leads to a mental breakdown when he is unable to resolve the conflict between his own expectations and those of his family.

Far more than in *The Beautiful Ones*, however, Armah develops in *Fragments* the dichotomy between the material world and the spiritual one. The central images of the novel, the cargo cult and the mame water, involve the idea of a communication between the mundane and the divine realms. So too in *Why Are We So Blest?* the central image from which the novel draws its title is of a dividing line between human and divine. Those who cross it are the 'Blest' of the title; those who fail to do so are Fanon's 'Damnés de la terre'. Those elevated to the status of the Blest are acclaimed as heroes, but they are alienated from the wretched, perhaps permanently.

In *The Beautiful Ones*, life was perceived as an unending state of entrapment; the cycle of birth and death was represented as a physical cycle occurring only for objects in the material world. In *Fragments* it is the human essence which enters upon the cycle of life, and death is merely a stage on the journey, welcomed by the dying as being itself a birth into a spirit existence. The new emphasis on the spiritual in *Fragments* and the novels which follow it is the major difference between the later novels and *The Beautiful Ones*.

In *Fragments*, there is hope that Baako's acceptance of the false values of his family may be countered by the arguments of his friends. The novel is not wholly pessimistic, and the fact that the closing words are a reaffirmation of the cyclic nature of spiritual life does much to counter the despair of the central character. In *Why Are We So Blest?* the note of despair dominates the last half of the novel, and its pessimistic narrator-editor allows it to end with the callously naïve voice, a voice 'like a retarded child' (p. 267), of the woman who has helped to destroy the hopes and the life of the central character, Modin. In this novel there is no sense of a spiritual life cycle continuing after death; instead the death of the spirit precedes that of the body. If there is any hope in the novel it lies in the early pages, which set up the myth of Prometheus' defection from Olympus to aid man as a model for Modin to follow, but the myth is concluded in the novel not with a Prometheus unbound but with Modin's death.

*Fragments* is the story of the return of a been-to to his home in Ghana and his reluctance to conform to his family's expectations of him. Baako's mother, sister and acquaintances are disappointed when he does not return from the United States laden with the wealth of the West. Baako, who has had a nervous breakdown overseas, finds a true friend and lover in his psychiatrist, Juana, a Puerto Rican who has come to Africa in search of a struggle to share in. His work as a scriptwriter is

rejected and ignored, and when Juana goes home on leave he is overcome with guilt at having disappointed his family and has a second breakdown. In the last section of the novel, related in flashbacks during the tale of his breakdown, we learn that his mother has been unable to build her big new house because he has not returned wealthy, and that his sister's greed for money has contributed to the death of her newborn baby. At the end of the novel it seems that Juana will be able to rescue Baako from the asylum and relieve him of his crazy guilt, with the help of his former teacher.

The novel is framed by chapters in which Baako's grandmother, Naana, reflects on 'the circular way' (p. 5), as she calls it. In the first chapter she is concerned with the completion of a ritual circle of events and observances which will ensure the return of the departing son. She recognizes Baako's departure as a kind of death, but in the circular way death leads to rebirth. In the last chapter, while she herself is moving gladly towards death, she is thinking of the hurt inflicted on her grandson Baako, and on the newborn great-grandchild who died, by those too eager for power and goods. Their materialistic vision has resulted in a loss of connection with the spirit world which can only be deleterious to those modern Ghanaians who are losing their way and misdirecting their journey. Naana's framing vision provides a sane view of the world against which we can measure Baako's vision as he moves towards the insanity of believing that he is wrong and the people who surround him are right. Where Naana and Baako concur in dissenting from the common view we can be reasonably sure that their vision is more valid than that of Baako's demanding relatives. *Why Are We So Blest?* also contains two important points of view: those of Solo and Modin; but in this novel Solo's pessimism and 'sense of terminus' (p. 115) prevails over Modin's early hopes.

Naana is a vital figure in *Fragments*. It is her emphasis on the spiritual which changes the focus of the novel from the mundane and temporal despair of *The Beautiful Ones* to a positive affirmation of a cyclic world. Much of the meaning of the novel rests on our appreciation of cyclic relationships.<sup>7</sup> Through Naana we see that the cycle of night and day can be upset by modern technology, with street lamps replacing the sun (p. 14), and that the modern set of priorities which emphasizes material goods can interfere even in the cycle of life and death — for the death of Naana's great-grandchild is a result of the premature ceremony of out-dooring (pp. 283-4) which threw it, 'like forced seed', into the world before the proper day in order to catch the guests with money in their

pockets.

Baako's journey to the United States was a cycle. It is seen in different terms by Baako and by Naana. For Naana, his departure is a death which will lead to a rebirth. For Baako, too, his departure from Ghana is like a death, but his return is the ghostly return of a spirit who should bear gifts to the living, but who in Baako's case comes empty handed.

The reaction of Baako's relatives when he arrives home without so much as a car to show for his years in the United States makes him think about his own situation in metaphorical terms, and he comes to see in it a parallel to the Melanesian cargo cult. This cult arose out of brief European trading contact with a people who conceived of the spirits of the dead as white. When the source of goods, the white trader (or in Baako's Ghanaian context the colonial power) withdrew, it was identified with the spirit world, and the cargo cult arose. In its best known form it is a millennial cult, and rests on a belief that on some future day the spirits of the dead will return in an aeroplane, bearing wonderful gifts from the spirit world for the living.<sup>8</sup> Armah uses this deification of the source of worldly goods after their withdrawal as a metaphor for the colonial experience in Africa. In the post colonial world all things Western are exalted, the man who has been to Britain or the United States has a special status and brings with him the magical gifts which fulfil the dreams of those left behind. In his confusion Baako comes to believe that in returning from this magical ghost world without the appropriate treasures<sup>9</sup> he has not only failed to fulfil the anticipations of his family but has broken the proper cycle of events. To him it seems that the modern 'cargo cult' of Ghana is validated by the African traditions of seeking the mediation of an ancestor when requesting the favour of a god. To have failed as a cargo bearer comes to seem a genuine failure of vocation. From this conception of what his proper role ought to have been spring the guilt and distress which lead to his nervous breakdown.

Naana recalls a vision of Baako's departure for the United States which is similar in interesting respects to his own later articulation of the cargo expectations:

I closed my eyes against the night that had disappeared outside, and I saw Baako roaming in unknown, forbidden places, just born here again after a departure and a death somewhere. He had arrived from beneath the horizon and standing in a large place that was open and filled with many winds, he was lonely. But suddenly he was not alone, but walking over among many people. All the people were white people all knowing only how to speak the white people's languages. Always, after saying anything, however small or large, they shook their white heads solemnly, as if they



were the ones gone before. Some touched hands slowly. But Baako walked among them neither touched nor seen, like a ghost in an overturned world in which all human flesh was white. And some of the people bore in their arms things of a beauty so great that I thought then in my soul this was the way the spirit land must be. (p. 15)

This pre-vision of a world of white ghosts bearing beautiful objects suggests Baako's use of the cargo cult parallel much later in the novel.

But Naana's vision of Baako's return is not that he has come back as a ghost. Rather she sees him as a child reborn, a 'new one' (p. 4), entering afresh on the cycle of life, and asking the questions before which her weak spirit fails. Hers is the more positive interpretation and the one which ultimately prevails, since it is her thoughts which end the novel.

Baako's pessimistic view is a way of describing the expectations of others. Baako's relatives, once their fear that he might remain in the United States for ever has been allayed, expect his return to conform to the pattern of other such returns. He will bring with him at least one car, and other shiny trinkets from the ghost world. To return, as Baako does, without tangible proofs of his been-to status, is unheard of. Baako's perception of this attitude as a cargo cult mentality is valid; his error lies in deciding that their assumptions are correct.

The gifts which Baako bears with him when he returns to Ghana are not material ones. The only tangible signs of his status are his certificates and diplomas, which prove to be totally valueless when he tries to get a job. His training is ignored, and his personal gift of creative vision is rejected by the bureaucrats who run GhanaVision, where his former teacher has found him a job. The relatives want material gifts, not gifts of vision, nor even certificates of qualification. Yet these are the gifts which Baako brings from overseas; and at the end of the novel his former teacher is trying to make him understand that what he has offered his people is important, although they have rejected it. Baako's guilt at his inability to provide what his family wanted can only be countered by the realization that he has fulfilled the cycle by bringing spiritual gifts from his experience of the ghost world, even if these are not appreciated by the earthbound ones to whom he has brought them.<sup>10</sup>

The image of the cargo cult is not the only one in the novel which involves the idea of contact between the mortal and the non-mortal worlds. Baako's account of himself as a ghost returning with gifts is echoed in his sister's account of Naana's teaching about the nature of man:

'You men are not supposed to be concerned with these things of the earth ... Has Naana never told you what a man is? ... Man is pure spirit and should be free and untouched, and it is only for a little while that he comes down to live in a body borrowed from us women, the females of the race, being trapped like sunlight that goes into a house through a window or into the earth through a hole ... So men should be spirits, ghosts, according to Naana.' (p. 124)

Men are ghostly by nature; it is women who provide them with their earthly bodies, and women who provide them with their mundane desires for material wealth. Women have the power either to save or to destroy (p. 257).

Set against the materialistic model of contact between mortal and non-mortal provided by the cargo cult, with its gift-bearing ghosts passing between the dead and the living, is the idea of the *mame water*. In the terms in which Baako explains the legend to Juana, the psychiatrist who becomes his friend and lover, the *mame water* is a goddess who comes from the sea at long intervals to meet her lover, a musician. The musician, knowing he must one day lose her entirely, is torn by the pain of love and longing, and from this pain produces his richest music.

Both the cargo cult and the *mame water* are images of a kind of gift passing from one world to another, but in the former the gifts and the passage between worlds are conceived of in mundane and material terms, while in the latter they are spiritual: gifts of vision and the power to express this vision. In the novel, Baako has received these gifts during his training in the United States, but his family rejects such spiritual offerings.

To a certain limited extent Juana herself takes over the role of the *mame water*. Juana comes from that ghostly land across the sea. Her affair with Baako begins by the sea (they even make love in the sea), and he feels for her an intense emotion 'like a growing happiness' (p. 175) which he tries to take hold of. It is to her that he explains the myth of the *mame water* which is a metaphor for the painful nature of his artistic inspiration.<sup>11</sup> During her absence overseas he has his second nervous breakdown. Her presence has been an assurance to him that he is not alone, and in her absence he has no confidant or sympathizer except his teacher. She relates to the spiritual part of him, and in her absence he becomes subject to the guilt which is brought on by his failure to perform the mundane functions expected of him by the earthbound women of his family.

The *mame water* myth is the spiritual equivalent of the materialistic cargo cult mentality, and is thus a more precise reflection of Baako's real

position than the cargo idea which leads him into self-destructive feelings of guilt. The aeroplane from the ghost world and the tangible gifts of the cargo-bearers are the warped, misunderstood notions of greedy people. The spiritual reality is expressed in Naana's sense of Baako's return as a rebirth in which, like the baby introduced to the world of the living too soon, he is at hazard, and in the mame water myth. As Baako says, the myths are good (p. 172). Only their use is degenerate. The transformation by a Ghanaian poet of the legend of the mame water and her gift of vision into a story of the bringing of electricity reflects in miniature the kind of distorted interpretation of which Baako becomes the victim. His studies overseas have given him the power to express his expanded vision<sup>18</sup> as he tries to do through his film scripts. But in the estimation of the world his vision is irrelevant and his gifts intangible and therefore valueless. When he accepts the judgement of the world his guilt and the mental strain caused by his attempt to deny his own way of seeing bring on his mental collapse. That he is in fact insane, not sanely visionary, at this point is made clear by his insistence on his own fault and the correctness of the cargo mentality. This is insanity. It is for Juana and his former teacher to help him regain his real spiritual vision and reject the worldly view.

Baako's film scripts reflect a true vision. In the United States he attained the expanded consciousness which separates him from other been-tos. It is his experience of the ghost world across the sea which is the source of his artistic inspiration, which proceeds from the clarity of his new expanded vision. Like Modin in *Why Are We So Blest?*, Baako has found that separation from his people enables him to see them more clearly. Like Solo and Modin he suffers for his knowledge, but Armah seems to be using the myth of the mame water to suggest that Baako's experiences overseas have been beneficial to him. Although his situation is one of acute alienation from the people at home, although he briefly accepts the false aspirations of the colonized bourgeoisie as correct, although his personal distress brings on a psychological dissolution, Baako is nevertheless a man who has been granted vision. He is an artist; and it seems that this, though it causes him great pain, saves him from being utterly condemned. If Juana can save him he may even live to write the truth again.

*Why Are We So Blest?* goes even further than *Fragments* in its study of the futility of effort and its picture of the African intellectual as radically, intolerably and inescapably alienated from the people. Yet still, I would suggest, the metaphor on which the novel is based suggests that to

have vision is worth something, that to make the futile gesture is better than not to make it.

In *Why Are We So Blest?* the United States, now not simply a ghostly world but the Land of the Blest,<sup>16</sup> is a destructive world. Yet only by passing from the world of the wretched to the world of the blest does the hero gain the vision which enables him to choose to cross back again and rejoin the wretched. Whether, having separated himself from his people, he can again rejoin them is the question raised by the novel. But it appears that however pessimistic Ammah may be about the role of the intellectual in Africa, the man who has joined the blest but attempts to rejoin his people has a vision which is valuable, and which can never be attained by those who have never escaped their wretchedness.

*Why Are We So Blest?* explores the fate of an African intellectual, Modin Dofu, who realizes that the West is destroying him and returns to Africa in search of an opportunity to make a revolutionary commitment to the people from whom he has been estranged. He is accompanied by his white American girlfriend, Aimée Reitsch, whose predatory nature ensures that the destruction begun by the impersonal West is completed by her personal agency, first through the soul destroying nature of her love, and finally when Modin is sexually tortured and left to die in the desert by a group of white men. This ill-assorted pair of lovers is observed by Solo Nkonam, an intellectual and writer who has already tried to regain his sense of identity with the people by involvement in the 'Congherian' revolution and failed.

Every thought, every utterance, every relationship in the novel is presented only as evidence for the operation of the polar opposites, Blest and Damned, on those who are moving between them.

The image of Blest and Damned is Modin's. It is he who reads a complacent newspaper editorial written for the Fourth of July and entitled 'Why Are We So Blest?' in which the author congratulates Americans on being among the blest (pp. 98-9). The terms in which the editorial is couched have a bearing on the metaphor which Modin has already been using to distinguish his own position: that of one who has attained a lonely eminence from which he can see farther than can the mass of people, but which denies him their companionship. The editorial extends this metaphor to apply to the separation between the sacred and the profane, and in the discussion which follows Mike the Fascist (the student who has shown Modin the editorial) tells Modin that the eminence which he has attained above his people is equivalent to his having crossed from the profane world to the sacred one.

Modin is already acutely aware of his own separation from his people. The educational system which selects and promotes progressively fewer people has finally selected him as the only one on a scholarship to Harvard. Modin's metaphor for the loneliness and spiritual dislocation which this separation causes is similar to Solo's. Solo sees it in terms of climbing a hill, from which one can see humanity below as a pattern, not as a collection of suffering individuals (p. 47). Modin sees it as a movement towards the 'central heights' (p. 33), that 'lonely eminence'.<sup>11</sup> Once he has been exposed to the Thanksgiving Day editorial this idea of an estranging, alienating distance between the educated African and his people is converted into a new dimension, the distance between lowly humanity and the demi-divinity of the Blest. The writer of the editorial sees the United States as another Eden. The crucial factor which makes the American Way paradisaical is its separation from the rest of the suffering world. The editorial suggests: 'The myth of Paradise finds its full meaning here in the New World. Paradise is a state of grace, and grace is space — the distance that separates the holy from the merely human, the sacred from the profane, separates and protects' (p. 98). That separation which for Solo leads to a shameful ability to forget the pain of the masses below the hill, and which for Modin is itself a painful alienation and an agonizing loneliness, is for the complacent American a matter for self-congratulation.

Mike the Fascist will not allow Modin to reject the premises of the article. When Modin protests, Mike retorts by pointing out that Modin himself has attained the Olympian heights of the system. He has made the crossing from the outer darkness of the mortal, non-American world to the divine realms of the Ivy League élite. Mike says, 'In the Greek tradition you'd be a crossover. One of those who rise from the plains to live on Olympus. A hero. Part man, part god. Therefore more interesting than either' (p. 101). In this image the lonely mountains on which Solo and Modin stand have become sacred mountains, and the separation from the world below is a complete change of existence, from mortal to divine. The heroic transition from mortality to divinity is seen by all the mortals below as a desirable change; only to reluctant heroes like Modin does it become a nightmare of loneliness.

Modin asks Mike about the possibility of the reverse transition: the Promethean change from divine allegiance to a compassionate descent to man, bearing the stolen gift of fire from heaven.<sup>12</sup> Mike scoffs at the idea, but in Modin's return to Africa, looking for a revolution to give his life in, we see his attempt to make the Promethean crossing. The punish-

ment for the attempt is Prometheus' punishment.<sup>16</sup> Modin finds that his education dooms him to a lonely elevation above the people; his loneliness is shared only by Aimée, harpy daughter of a race of destroyers. At the end of the novel he is tied to a jeep by a group of white men with wild, predatory eyes, and his penis is severed while Aimée fondles the bleeding stump. Clearly the punishment of Prometheus is suggested, in a particularly gruesome variant form, in this scene, but the situation of Promethean punishment is presented in the whole of Modin's alienated existence and relationship with Aimée, not just in the final scene. His isolation on his separate, lofty peak of education parallels that of Prometheus, chained to his crag, and the whole of his relationship with Aimée is an intimate and totally destructive torture masquerading as love.

Modin's phrase for what is omitted by Mike's theory, 'the Promethean factor' is one of many puns in the novel on this word and others.<sup>17</sup> The Promethean 'factor' refers both to the notion of the reverse crossing from human to divine forgotten by Mike and to the slavers' agent with whom Modin associates Africans received into the ranks of the *blest*. Modin wants to serve the revolution but he ends by destroying himself without any assurance that his gesture has born fruit. Herein lies the pessimism of the novel. Prometheus was punished for successfully providing man with fire, formerly the exclusive possession of the gods; Modin is doomed to die without having succeeded in communicating to his people the gifts of education, vision and hope which he has gained during his sojourn among the *blest*.

Solo sees that Modin's chief weakness is his love for Aimée. In seeking white companionship as a way out of his loneliness Modin has completed his alienation from Africa. He has embraced the very race which has engineered his alienation in the first place. Solo feels that Modin's death was a wasted one. For life to have been worthwhile there must be some point to death. Solo clearly wants to see death as an investment in a better future for others. He faces this problem while he is in hospital with 'mental problems' (p. 53). He is approached by an old man who has lost a leg in the revolution. Now he spends all his time reading about the French Revolution in an attempt to find out who benefitted, who gained. In response to the old man's appeals to Solo to explain why, if '*l'essence de la révolution, c'est les militants*', the militants do not gain from the revolution, Solo is forced to evolve a metaphor which relies on a second meaning of '*l'essence*':

'You are right,' I said. 'The militants are the essence. But you know, that also means they are the fuel for the revolution. And the nature of fuel — you know, something pure, light, even spiritual, which consumes itself to push forward something heavier, far more gross than itself — The truck represents society: Any society. Heavy. With the corrupt ones, the opportunists, the drugged, the old, the young, everybody, in it. And then there are the militants, pushing the whole massive thing from the lower to the higher level. But they themselves are destroyed in the process.' (p. 37)

If we can allow Modin's attempt to return to Africa and identify with the people to have been a Promethean crossing, even though he is not permitted to join the revolution, we might enrol him honorarily among the militants. Certainly his Promethean crossing has shown the way for other Olympian 'heroes' to follow. There may be only one Promethean crossing in the Graeco-Roman system, but as Modin says, there are other myths, elsewhere in the world, involving the crossing from divine to human.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps Modin's effort alone could have been a sufficient gesture. Like Promethean fire, 'something pure, light, even spiritual, which consumes itself to push forward something heavier, far more gross than itself', he tries to become fuel for the revolution. He has descended from his lonely height in order to help push society upwards.

In Solo's opinion, Modin's actual death is an unproductive one. As far as Solo is concerned, Modin's fine fire of revolutionary purpose was consumed before he went out into the desert to meet his death. Yet the thrust of the imagery in the early part of the novel, and particularly the use of the Promethean myth, pushes the reader towards the view that Modin's Promethean crossing is a positive gesture, and that his death is the punishment for daring to attempt such a return. It is Solo's negative interpretation of his death which colours the end of the novel with despair, as Naana's view suggests hope at the end of *Fragments*. Solo's view is that Modin's death is 'useless, unregenerative destruction' (p. 263), a sign of the futility of a failed gesture. The parody of Promethean punishment in the novel leaves no room for a Prometheus unbound. Solo finds literary inspiration in Modin's journals, making of the pieces of his life 'that most important first act of creation, that rearrangement without which all attempts at creation are doomed to failure' (p. 231), but it would be too optimistic to suggest that Solo is left carrying the Olympian flame. Solo recognizes that in his attempt to present Modin's experiences he is 'a mere parasite, feeding upon spilt entrails' (p. 232).<sup>11</sup> Solo's interpretation of Modin's end is the interpretation of a man whose own life is a failure and who is unable to see beyond his own despair.

We need not accept Modin's death at Solo's valuation. The man who attempts the Promethean crossing is more admirable than the man who does not, and Modin has the grace to see that life is not worth living once the spirit is dead. There may be a man who is strong enough to endure the pains of the crossing and keep his dreams, but Solo's analysis of mankind in the opening pages of the novel suggests that the visionaries are automatically 'the losers, life's failures' (p. 14), while those who are tough enough to survive the Promethean torment are less than admirable in Solo's eyes:

They are certain they are in a struggle that gives an answer to the ultimate why of life, making tomorrow's revolution. Their entrails have an iron toughness mine do not have ... But they are ignorant. They have learned as much about the things that have gone on and the things still going on as seeing eyes and hearing ears can teach anybody. Yet after all this knowledge, from somewhere within they find the enthusiasm to continue answering to the name of militants. Their entrails are hard, that I must say in justice...

Our time demands from us just one great observance: that we should pretend. To live well now means to develop as highly as possible the ability to do one thing while saying, and preferably also thinking, another thing entirely. The successful liars are those with entrails hard enough to bear the contradiction and to thrive on it. (pp. 13-14)

The fact that Solo sees all effort as futile does not make Modin's effort valueless. Attempts to push the state uphill may be Sisyphean, but this is no reason to cease trying. The commitment of despair may be as effective as the commitment of hope, and the belief that one is inevitably doomed to suicide need not prevent one from dedicating one's death to a good cause. Nor is the intellectual hopelessly removed from the revolution while he may bring the fire that will light the fuel.

In both novels, *Fragment* and *Why Are We So Blest?*, Ammah considers the aspirations of the bourgeois towards a Western model in terms of the communication between a mundane African world and the essentially dead, destructive world of the West, and explores this in terms of the psychology of individuals. Yet one must recognize that Ammah uses the myths of transition and communication between the two worlds to express a beneficial form of contact as well as a deadly one. Against the acquisitive cargo cult mentality in *Fragment* are set Naana's view of Baako's sojourn in the ghost world as one which precedes his return in newborn form, and the mame water myth of ecstatic, potentially destructive inspiration. And, while aspiring to a position in the land of



the blest may lead to a lonely alienation for the harpy-ridden 'hero' in *Why Are We So Blest?*, it also offers the possibility of a reverse crossing back to the people, bearing Promethean fire.

#### NOTES

1. Ayi Kwei Armah (Boston, 1970); page references in the text are to the Heinemann edition of 1974.
2. Ayi Kwei Armah (New York, 1972); page references in the text are to the Heinemann edition of 1974.
3. Armah's interest in Fanon appears in his non-fiction also, for instance Ayi Kwei Armah, 'African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific?' in *Presence Africaine*, 64 (1967) pp. 6-30.
4. Ayi Kwei Armah (Boston, 1968), hereafter referred to in the text as *The Beautiful Ones*.
5. Gareth Griffiths, 'Structure and Image in *The Beautiful Ones...*', in *Studies in Black Literature*, II, 2 (Summer 1971), pp. 1-9.
6. For instance the image of the eating of ripe and unripe fruit.
7. These are discussed at some length in B. J. Barthold, 'Three West African Novelists: Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Ayi Kwei Armah', unpublished doctoral dissertation (University of Arizona, 1975).
8. See Kirsten Holst Petersen, 'Loss and Frustration: An Analysis of A. K. Armah's *Fragments*', in *Kunapipi*, I, 1 (1979), pp. 56-7, for a fuller explanation of the existence of the cult in New Guinea, or Roger Rasner, 'Fragments: The Cargo Mentality', in *Sa Sbiru*, V, 2 (1974), pp. 55-64.
9. But note, *Fragments* p. 224, that Armah sees the beam to as an intermediary, definitely not a creator of goods. In this respect he is like the factor of *Why Are We So Blest?*
10. Edward Lobb, 'Armah's *Fragments* and the Vision of the Whole', in *Ariel*, X, 1 (January 1979), pp. 25-38 deals with the ideas of seeing and understanding in the novel. I would suggest that Baako sees, but needs Juana and Ocran to help him understand what he sees.
11. She herself does not provide him with artistic inspiration, and he uses her typewriter only for his letter of resignation from GhanaVision.
12. His first nervous breakdown is the result of an 'overexpansion of consciousness'. His second is caused by his attempt to fix his mind to the cargo-consciousness of those around him.
13. The word is carefully chosen by Armah: on the one hand the Blest are mortals beatified and raised to the status of demigods as Mike suggests; on the other the Isles of the Blest are the Western lands of the dead.
14. Edward Lobb, 'Personal and Political Fate in Armah's *Why Are We So Blest?*', in *World Literature Written in English*, XIX, 1 (Spring 1980), pp. 5-9 points out some of the many references to the separation between high and low in the novel.
15. The gift to the people is represented in the novel by the vision seen from a lonely

height, by hope, and by life which is the fuel of the revolution

16. Prometheus was chained to a lonely crag, where a predatory bird daily devoured his liver
17. Lobb, in *W/LWE*, p. 6, draws attention to the pun on 'factor' at this point. Such word play is common in the novel, for instance the use of the words 'blest', 'eminence' and 'essence'
18. At least one such myth involves sacrificial death as well, but to suggest a parallel between Modin's death and the crucifixion would be to take the analogy too far
19. Lobb, in *W/LWE*, has an interesting argument about the parasitic nature of Solo's literary efforts. In connection with the Promethean parallel in the novel, Solo's emphasis on his position as the scavenger of 'apilt, entrails' is worth noting



Nisim Ezekiel. Photo: Anna Rutherford.

## 'Making light of the process': Nissim Ezekiel's poetic fictions

From the mid-sixties Nissim Ezekiel's considerations of his focal themes of commitment, identity, India, poetry, love and prayer have become more radically fictive.<sup>1</sup> It is as though to make sense of his world, he has been working to break down perceptions into 'new structures, richer, finer, fitted to the primary tendencies of our nature'.<sup>2</sup> But these fictions, the suggestion of infinite variations and of no one 'truth', enter Ezekiel's poetry almost reluctantly. He was early struck by a need to define, to place his world and to see himself 'No longer unresolved / But definite as morning' ('Something to Pursue', *ATC*, p. 14). And even when he recognizes that his 'dim but definite ... final shape / Is probably uncertainty' it alarms him ('What Frightens Me...', *Third*).

In his early poetry, up to and including much of *The Unfinished Man*, there is a strangely felt tension between the logical workings of the reason and the non-logical associations of the intuition. There is a desire for an equitable balance 'Between the élan of desire / And the rational faculties' ('In Emptiness', *ATC*, p. 12), and this balance, which becomes a part of the poetry of the sixties and later, is to be seen not as an arrival but as a way of proceeding. And while the doubt and ambivalence of the early poetry constitute elements of his later knowledge, his poetry, through variations, repetitions, and the increasingly open-ended nature of his vision, becomes a record of the growth of a mind acquiring a more complex and inclusive knowledge. So that, when he speaks now of giving things their 'exact name', we sense a radical shift in Ezekiel's thought. He now seeks to name the essence of things and, after the fashion of Wallace Stevens, he seems to hold that things reveal their essence as a sum of variations.

Ezekiel's most recent work is a poetry of process and growth blending reason and intuition ('the light of reason', 'Mind', *Hymns*, p. 43) and reclaiming something of the 'lost language of dreams' while retaining a hard-headed awareness of the need to confront the present. Such a view of poetry prompts significant formal changes, but it does not lead to

diffusion or a shattering of the poetry. His thought is anchored in reality; and the later poetry contains innumerable excursions into stereotypes out of which truth and validity have been emptied. His appeal is for a growing knowledge which can make of his place an 'environment'. India becomes somewhere to endure, to survive, where he is not imprisoned by time, place, or idea ('Choices'), for '[t]he sky / Is smaller than this open eye' ('Subject of Change', *Hymns*, p. 9). As he says in his review of Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness*, the Indian fails to perceive that his 'ideals are false and stultifying ... (causing) the insensitive contradiction between belief and way of life' (p. 202), and by facing change, the fluctuations of knowledge, and the need to live the everlasting now of the 'vital present tense', Ezekiel projects a vision of the future.

He contends that he lives 'on the frontiers of the future' and it is out of this zone of change and movement that he makes his poetry.<sup>5</sup> Ezekiel's most convincing engagement with 'the future' is to be found in the poetry of *The Exact Name* and later, and while the thrust of this paper is towards this later poetry, the early work lays the foundation for what is to follow and will be briefly looked at.

There is a cohesiveness to *A Time to Change* which is not to be found in Ezekiel's work again until *The Unfinished Man*.<sup>6</sup> There are certain focal poems ('A Time to Change', 'Something to Pursue', 'To a Certain Lady') to which groups of poems cohere, establishing a web of linkages and setting in motion central themes while catching the ambivalence and equivocation of a mind seeking certainty.<sup>7</sup> For Ezekiel, a poem is a moment, a fire-like fusion in the continuous flux of the creative life. A poem isolates an event, a moment, an idea, and inscribes a circle around it,<sup>8</sup> whereas 'poetry', he suggests, moves with the whole flux of experience, seeking to find a coherence but not isolating that experience from the flux out of which it originates. This is the principal difference between the controlling attitude of mind of the early, and the late, poetry. He comes increasingly to accept that 'The end does not matter, / The way is everything' ('Something to Pursue'), and, looking forward to the open-endedness of his later work, he calls on the reader for a kind of Sartrean commitment:

Touching what I have said,  
The voice alone is mine,  
The rest is what you make of it.

And, on returning to India in 1952 after more than three years in England, the easy complacencies and the confident moments of his first two volumes of poetry are dashed. The insight, latent in *A Time to Change*, of the frail but intense humanity of man, surfaces: Adam-like, 'Upright (he) goes forth / To meet the world' ('Pagan', *The Third*). The journey, not the arrival, becomes the focal point of the poet's excursions into inner and outer reality: he is man alone facing a fallen world of which he must make sense. His sense of the reality he faces is framed in terms of the difficulty of catching reality in language: 'reality is in flux, it can be held only for a moment and the language must live and grow with these changing perceptions'.

The unity of *The Unfinished Man* revolves around the dialectic established between poems like 'Love Sonnet', catching the mystery at the centre of both love and words, and 'Urban', 'Enterprise', and 'A Morning Walk'. There is a place for city and hill (and their various analogues) in the lovers' world; and out of the tension between these four poems a vision of a mind piecing the parts into a whole. And in 'Case Study' and 'Jamini Roy' Ezekiel seems to have come to accept the interrelatedness of all relations. 'Case Study' gathers in ironically the idealism of 'A Time to Change' ('His marriage was the worst mistake of all') and compresses this idealism into an awareness of his need for stability and the impossibility of attaining it: 'he never moved / Unless he found something he might have loved'. 'Jamini Roy', on the other hand, looks forward to 'the law' which can make life's 'spirit sing and dance': this is a new kind of synthesis built upon infinite process. Roy's paintings flow from a mind in harmony with the external world. His fictions are personal, and yet, the poet says, they 'make my childhood crystallize'. As surely as the archetypes of sun, hill, and tree, Roy's fictions reach to the essential.

In 'Case Study' the schizoid voice of much of *The Unfinished Man* finds a synthesis: one voice speaks to another. This is not the re-integration of personality that we might expect as a resolution for the schizoid, so much as an acceptance of the condition. The narrator warns the protagonist against the debilitating custom of his life and advises him to 'break / It with a sudden jerk'; but, he cautions, 'use your head'. There can be no either/or: the figure must accept the dual aspects of his being. And, ultimately, the resolution of the volume is that there can be no resolution: it is 'the unfinished man' speaking. Like Roy's paintings what the poet says is becoming less literal voicing a larger reality with which he is in touch through his imagination. Hence, while in this volume and *The*

*Exact Name* Ezekiel draws on conventional archetypes to carry his vision, it is the imaginative fictions he makes that speak of the elemental truths.

As he begins to see himself and his society with new eyes, so his poetry undergoes a reshaping: there are significant technical changes and extension of themes as he searches for the word and the formal pattern which can body forth his particular and personal experience.<sup>6</sup> His sense of being alone, of being divided man, and of living and moving through a world of change form the basis of his vision. His vision of reality now embraces the dualities, the beauty and the horror of existence, its joy and despair; for to ignore these is to live in pretence ('A Conjugation').

Ambivalence becomes a value. 'There is a point', he says, 'in being obscure / about the luminous' ('In Retrospect'); too often in the early poetry, he admits, he 'used too many words'. And it is 'In Retrospect' which makes the clearest technical break with the poetry which has gone before. There is a compression of language to an epigrammatic conciseness, accompanied by a flexibility of syntax and tone which strive to maintain the integrity of the idea or experience embodied in an image: the reader now has a place in the poem.

The interrelatedness of groups of poems, noted in *A Time to Change* and *The Unfinished Man*, becomes more crucial: 'Perspectives' links 'Love Poem' to poems such as 'An Affair' or 'Event' by picking up the hill imagery of the earlier poems and, by echoing the situation of 'Love Sonnet' of the previous volume, it also stands in ironic juxtaposition to the discordant sexual encounters of 'Event' and 'Marriage'.

Sex and religion become sources of blessedness, and with this comprehensiveness of spirit the lover-poet can risk being 'Diverted from the safer paths of men' into the 'marsh to see the Grail'. There is an allusion here to 'A Morning Walk' and the 'marsh' of appearances, but now the context is affirmative. Risking the ride into the marsh, he finds not an illusory world 'where things are what they seem' but the Grail, symbol of the pure and contrite, and outward symbol of one's primal unity. His illumination comes from what he absorbs in his spirit, not from what he perceives with his eyes.

Ezekiel's sense of reality is now enlarged from the predominantly external world of the early verse. He pleads for that 'cold / Lucidity, of mind, where 'the mills of God are never slow', which gathers together 'flesh and bone' and 'myths of light' into a vision which may make 'the dead ... hear, the blind recover sight' ('Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher'). This unique improvisation stems from an understanding of that 'silence near the source (of a river), or by a shore / Remote and thorny like the heart's

dark floor') that is, from that solitude in which one can see into the life of things. This is an expression of the imaginative self feeling its separation from, but giving shape to, reality. He will 'wait for words ... in patient love', before articulating the abstract into sensuous form. Poet, love, and birdwatcher are drawn together, observers not only of outer but also of inner worlds, and the passion of their act is transmuted into a 'slow movement (which) seems ... to say much more' and shows no restless searching after completion. Poetry and love, word and woman, restless companions in Ezekiel's earlier verse, are now interlocked in a poetry of process. Poetry is being made out of the commonness of 'flesh and bone' and the mystery of 'myths of light', and, we sense, out of the crooked, restless flight — in which he struggles to synthesize disparate elements of his art — comes a sudden ignition, a 'unified flow of language within which meanings are isolated at the peril of both language and meaning'.<sup>8</sup> Throughout 'Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher', language and meaning strain at the tightly rhymed ten-line stanzas, but there is a high proportion of run-on lines (ten out of twenty) giving freedom to a multi-levelled apprehension — the intellectual and emotional movements of the poem — and the long sentences catch the tensions of a mind immersed in the flux of being.

As 'Poetry Reading' (EN) suggests, the poem may take on a life of its own. Listening to a poem, the speaker is drawn into the experience of the poem as images fall, swell and bring back 'message(s) from another shore'. The poem flows from the core of the poet's being, but once it is created it assumes its own presence, forms links with other poems and with other experiences, calls upon the reader, and reader, poem, and poet are drawn into a unique and ever-changing relationship. The final impression of 'In India', for example, issues from the juxtaposition of the separate scenes (as on canvas<sup>9</sup>), each of which must be interpreted and absorbed as we take in the whole. And the variations in form constitute a technical comment on the need to break with a redundant formality and custom.

The technical experiments of the volume begin with 'Night of the Scorpion'. The narrative is colloquial in diction and tone, and it approaches the movement of free verse, but in spite of the numerous run-on lines and a minimum of syntactic marks, the formal rhetorical devices create a technical tension within the poem. As Parthasarathy points out, the 'parallelisms ... are obviously borrowed from the register of ritual and liturgy'.<sup>10</sup> And what began as a laconic recounting of 'the night (his) mother was stung by a scorpion' develops into a ritual exorcism in which

only the mother retains her objectivity: the speaker momentarily falls into the parallelism which characterizes the peasants, and the 'sceptic, rationalist' father attempts his own magic to exorcize the 'Evil One'. What stands out is the selfless love of the mother for her children in contrast to the ritual formula of the peasants' incantation, the mesmerized speaker, and the confusion of the father. The event is turned over in the poet's mind, catching views from several perspectives and drawing the reader into the event. And, in its very open-endedness and its rhythmic tensions, we sense a more exact naming of the event than any purely objective account.

Meaning ceases to be designative or referential during, and after, *The Exact Name*; there is a repudiation of singular categories, and Ezekiel increases the burdens he places on his reader. Such an opening-out of his craft can lead to irresponsibility but he hints at the kind of commitment he envisages. He wants 'Light' and spontaneity, however, there can be no satisfaction 'in being compulsive / or mindless' ('Transparently'). And, with pertinence to the act of reading as well as the making of poetry, he asserts that

The most painful  
confrontation  
makes me happier.

Any resolution now will be 'within [his] limits', and any 'act' is performed, 'not to be known', but 'to become form and find / [his] relevance' ('In the Theatre'). Ever conscious of his outsider status, he can nevertheless come 'home', and make of his homecoming, his fluctuations of spirit, and his struggle with language, a poetry which expresses his turmoil. While not a Hindu, Ezekiel seems to be calling for a renaissance of the traditional Hindu acceptance of change and quest as a function of being. He is both of, and not of, the society; all he can hope to know is the 'landscape' of his own being — 'justified by being there' — and although 'the view' hurts 'it seems important / somehow ... to endure it' ('A Small Summit', *JSAAL*, p. 93).

In this late poetry Ezekiel is continually trying to restructure his relationship with the spiritual and the phenomenal world. He is conscious both of the difficulty of knowing the self and of the 'hundred veils' and more that cover Creation, but it is 'death' to seek release from the acts of finding out. His 'action' or 'commitment' is not a release, or a desire for escape from the world of actuality into a spiritual transcen-



dence, it is an endeavour to embody the two in a world-view which pushes one's being to the limits of consciousness. Ezekiel is now writing a poetry which seeks, through 'fictions', to accommodate man to his own, and the world's, transience.

I am tired  
of irony and paradox  
of poetry direct and oblique  
of statement plain or symbolic  
of doctrine and dogma  
of pure sensibility consuming  
the world with fire  
and leaving it ashes  
of categories and labels  
and of that which is beyond  
of the divisible and indivisible  
of the Many  
and even, yes  
of the One...

(*Theological*, *JSL*, p. 99)

But it is in the ironic gap between an apparently indifferent God and the blinkered vision of man with which Ezekiel is engaged, and such an engagement is an active commitment to being.

In 'Island' the poet and the landscape mirror each other: and by finding his way in his 'island'-city the poet may find his way into himself. One element of this awareness is of his islanded, cast-away status.

Unsuitable for song as well as sense  
the island flowers into slums  
and skyscrapers, reflecting  
precisely the growth of my mind.  
I am here to find my way in it.

(*Hymns*, p. 14)

'Sometimes I cry for help', he admits, 'but mostly keep my own counsel', making fictions to find 'a single willed direction'. He 'cannot leave the island, / [He] was born here and belong[s]', and although it may be 'imperfect' it is a kind of 'paradise', to humanly be made sense of.

Ezekiel keeps circling back to the need to find 'meaning / in the flux' ('For Satish Gujral', *Hymns*, p. 28). Here, the poem gyres outward from the deaf artist to the metaphorical deafness of us 'all', who 'martyr' meaning

to lonely  
and heated visions whirling  
after truth.

But now the 'resolution' the poet seeks is to set music free in the air, 'to hear what can't be heard / when everybody speaks'. As he says in 'Testament', a poem largely concerned with ways of 'seeing', 'More should be remembered / than is forgotten'. Memory, however, is only the beginning; then comes 'the silent hour' of contemplation in which the event is reborn; and 'later, the moment of winging...' which is 'the resurrection'. After the rebirth of this memory — 'fact and fiction' —

we owe the event a colour,  
form and future history,  
not the thing alone created  
or the city served  
but a life designed  
for a steadfast radiation

(*'Testament'*, *JSL*, p. 109)

The transforming imagination can find a contemporary relevance in a remembered private or public event, and can transmute the memory into a pattern 'designed / for a steadfast radiation', opening the event to interpretation. For without this kind of re-creation,

we never learn the art  
of bringing up-to-date  
the essential truth of old performances,  
abandoning the costumes, make-up,  
settings, stage directions;

we never learn the art of making our own fictions; of 'finding what will suffice'. But Ezekiel does not confine this kind of creativity to 'poets alone'; it is the 'calling ... of men and nations / the spaceship earth itself'. All are cast into the role of creator; perhaps it is only through a creative redemption of being that the future can be faced.<sup>11</sup>

Ezekiel would face the future with an 'open' life, 'stripped ... of all pretence', working at being 'exact ... in quietude of mutual need' ('In Twenty-Four Lines', *JSL*, p. 110). His wish is to grow into the future; 'we cannot live on echoes' ('Poem of the Separation', *Hymns*, p. 29),<sup>12</sup> and, as he studies the organic world about him, he begins to understand the careful nurture central to growth. In 'Lawn' (*JSL*, p. 113) the earth is transformed by the gardener (Gardener?) into 'a thin transparent

green', but the gardener, the quintessence of patience, knows 'the gentle art of leaving things alone'. Confident in the process of change and growth, he possesses that exemplastic power which intuits

a silence in the depths  
a stir of growth  
an upward thrust  
a transformation —  
botanic turmoil  
in the heart of earth

The present turmoil, growth of grass or soul of man, is seen in terms of a metamorphosis which has to take place to enable a growth into the future. In terms of its philosophical religious and aesthetic statement the poem is central to Ezekiel's *oeuvre*, for

when the grass becomes too long  
you only  
cut it  
short  
to let it grow again.  
You keep an eye on it  
in rapport with its secret laws  
maintain its ritual  
of morality

(*Lawn*)

The problem of creating and interpreting one's own 'fictions' may lead to a withdrawal into self to become a victim and a cause of the fever of the universe 'without a cure of it'. There is always the hope, however, that 'A man withdrawn into himself / may be a man moving forward'. But any such movement must be towards the rediscovery of the 'lost / ... language of dreams'. If he gives himself to a sense of spiritual emptiness — 'upsurges, explosions, abysses, paradoxes' — there can be no reintegration of the divided self which is in part built upon the very isolation and precariousness that it would reject. The synthesis which Ezekiel seeks is one to which the notion of change is essential.

The searching, inquiring mind behind these poems finds the expression of its organic and growing ideas in forms which are themselves organic. The analogy between poetry-love-religion still holds, but there is an element of faith present which has largely edged out the agnostic of the earlier poetry: the Word now seems more protean, more mysterious:

Just when you give up  
the whole process  
begins again

and you are as pure  
as if you had confessed  
and received absolution

And in a group of aphoristic statements at the end of his *Poster Prayers*,<sup>14</sup> he speaks of a 'new poetry / by a new man' drawing his Word from God (19, *JSAL*, p. 137), finding his song where he belongs (20), from the 'near, (with) / affection for the familiar' (18). He prays that he can resist unravelling the mysteries of the heart (15) and let his 'actions' (his poems) 'earn their names' (16): he is singing, he says, 'The song of [his] Experience' (11). But, as 'Passion Poems' and 'Hymns in Darkness' (*Hymns*, pp. 50-62) make clear, his world is given an order and coherence by his sense of change: 'The Enemy is God / as the Unchanging One' (59). He sees himself as a 'permanent and proud / metaphor of struggle', but this strange bravura is then undercut, for the struggle is between the warring sides of his personality; his 'creative, self-destructive self'. And it is ultimately to this dividend creative self that we attend; he cannot, like a Dhanya or a Ganga (see *JSAL*, 139, *Hymns*, 37),

... pass  
through the eye of a needle  
to self-forgetfulness.

(*London*, *Hymns*, p. 33)

And although 'the language really / separates' ('Minority Poem', *JSAL*, p. 143), making him aware of his isolation, it is also, he says, 'our conspicuous gift' ('Talking', *JSAL*, p. 148). He sees the need continually to remake it 'as we make our lives', for in the struggle to apprehend, 'the words / materialize, begin to matter'. Ezekiel is here calling on both the primal meaning of language, the original breath, and the creative involvement of man's intellect with language, continually searching it for its essence. And the reach of his fictions, forever remaking self, time and place, is towards those 'supreme fictions' which strike to the essences; towards 'the Word, / made flesh', sought again and again.<sup>15</sup>

Growing into his poetry and his environment, Ezekiel moves towards radical fictions as the only way of expressing the reality he sees. From the mid-sixties onwards he has been creating a spiritual and psychic 'room' of his own which may either provide access to nothing or serve as a

doorway to the infinite enigmas of self and place: he says, 'I have to name anew / the things I see' ('The Room', *Hymns*, p. 42). And while outwardly 'the room is always the same', as psychic reality it shifts 'restlessly / and falls into different patterns'. Like Naresh, in *Marriage Poem*, Ezekiel recognizes a need to 'improvise from day to day, [since] this improvisation is our existence'.<sup>18</sup> Such an idea of creative continuity derives from a sense of the mind as both intellect and imagination, reason and intuition,<sup>19</sup> confronting and attempting to make sense of the beauty and the terrifying reality of the present. And, while Ezekiel feels cut off from the Hindu (and Indian) because of an accident of history, he cannot help sensing that 'residues of meaning still remain' from the past, just as 'darkest myths meander through the pain / Towards a final formula of light' ('Philosophy', *UM*): he is possessed by and possesses all that constitutes his world (*Nudes*, 1).

*Nudes*, in its infinite variations, is Ezekiel's most recent exploration. Trying to find the exact words to praise his love's beauty, the lover-poet lists 'all those landscape images' — 'Hills, valleys, swelling river-banks ... / ... breasts and buttocks seen as fruit, thighs as tree-trunks' — but these only 'tell a small / fragmented part of the story': 'as person' she resists definition, reclines, 'resisting form' (*Nudes*, 9). And he, as lover-poet 'given up to nakedness', asserts: 'We cannot be transcribed' (*Nudes*, 1). With a belief in growth and the future, and willing to be 'absorbed in ... everything', he seeks to evoke the 'living presence':

Life on earth, the cosmos,  
even the spirit of God  
in the void and the void.

(*Nudes*, sonnet 8)

Form and idiom have been gradually modified to implicate the reader in the act of the poem and to provide the mind with a catapult into a larger reality: the poet would bring back messages 'from another shore' in the hope that we may 'see, touch, hear, hold' (*Nudes*, sonnet 8) the breathing life of the poem and the experience from which it is spawned.

Nissim Ezekiel gives us a mind 'in the act of finding / What will suffice', but it is the mind of a man who has made certain commitments to his time and place ('Background Casually', *Hymns*, p. 11). And, in his role as maker and namer, he names the presences and absences of his 'room': its shadows and its visions, and this may lead either into an abyss or 'right into the air' ('Testament'), making 'light of the process' ('After Reading a

Prediction'). The truth he now seeks is qualitatively different to that conceived of in the earlier poetry; it is a profound and fruitful knowledge, beyond 'meaning' and 'understanding', drawing the whole being of poet and reader into the reality of the poem and its perception. This is a coming home to language and to poetry; it leads towards and not away from reality. He seeks an 'art' that 'entrances reason / and makes us human'. And this is the impetus of Ezekiel's art and his insight: to make us human. He acts, creates, he suggests, to be enjoyed and to speak of truth, thus transforming his experience and vision of reality into something original. He has acquired a kind of tolerance — not a blind submission — and he celebrates his very survival and his 'home ... a kind of hell / to be made tolerable' ('After Reading a Prediction'). On this 'firmer ground' of a synthesis built on a holistic sense of self and place, different with every passing moment but permanent in its changeability, he says, 'I seek ... / To improvise my later fiction'.

Ultimately, Ezekiel acknowledges the flux and change of outer reality, but he seeks to come to terms by growing and changing with the flux. As he says in an early poem, he could withdraw into 'a world of old simplicities', turning from 'The World' to live in an unambiguous past, but instead he embarks on something of a renaissance, reclaiming the mind and creativity out of the Hindu past and projecting it into the future. In this way he would inject life into the moral, spiritual, and ethical world of the contemporary Indian. At the centre of his world is active and enduring man. We are conscious of his infinite potential and his ravaged, crushed limits. And we sense in the making of his fictions that Ezekiel is trying to construct and convey a dynamic continuum between a man and his world.

## NOTES

1. All references to the poetry and essays of Nissim Ezekiel are to the following volumes or articles. Hereafter all references, with the relevant abbreviation and pagination, will be included in the text, *A Time to Change* (London: The Fortune Press, 1952), (*ATC*); *Sixty Poems* (Bombay: Published by the Poet, 1953), (*Sixty*); *The Third* (Bombay: The Strand Bookshop, 1959), (*Third*); *The Unfinished Man: Poems Written in 1959* (Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1960), (*UM*); *The Exact Name: Poems 1960-1964* (Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1965), (*EN*); *Hymns in Darkness* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1976), (*Hymns*); *Nudus*. All quotations are from a MS. kindly given to the writer by Mr Ezekiel, who also provided a copy of *Sixty*

- Poems and was a patient correspondent. *Nudes* has subsequently been published in the first issue of *Kanapipi* (Spring, 1979); *Journal of South Asian Literature*, XI, 3-4 (Spring-Summer, 1976), 'The Nissim Ezekiel issue'. This collection has been drawn on for poems from *The Third* (unprocured) and for poetry written later than 1965 and not included in *Hyacinth*. The issue also contains Ezekiel's review of V. S. Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness*, 'Naipaul's India and Mine' (pp. 193-205), (*JSAL*).
2. As Frank Kermode says of Wallace Stevens, quoting from Santayana's *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900, p. 270). Cited by Kermode, *Wallace Stevens* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), p. 8.
  3. See John B.urtson, 'An Interview with Nissim Ezekiel', *WLE*, 15, 1 (1976), p. 90.
  4. The logic of the volume captures the vacillating spirit of a mind, on the one hand, seeking a pastoral ideal of 'old simplicities' in which everything has its place, and on the other, becoming lost in 'absurd and devious routes' (*The Worm*, p. 11). The results are the 'schizophrenic agonies' of 'Something to Pursue, I' and 'The Double Horror'.
  5. 'Foreword', *Sixty*: 'I am interested in writing poetry, not in making a personal verse record. But poetry is elusive; to write a poem is comparatively easy'. 'Poetry' alludes to this sense of structure.
  6. See Henry James, 'The Preface to *Roderick Hudson*', *The Art of the Novel* (1934; rpt. New York: Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 5.
  7. The poems of *The Unfinished Man* are underscored by the tension between these 'old' and 'new' positions: the wish to define, and awareness of a world in process.
  8. See Christopher Wiseman, 'The Development of Technique in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel', *JSAL*, XI, 3-4 (1976), 241-52. While in essential agreement with Wiseman's thesis we believe that by overlooking *A Time to Change* in which, within the formal patterning of stanzas, there is considerable variation, Wiseman misses the continuity in Ezekiel's poetry.
  9. Ezekiel, 'Poetry and Philosophy', *Quest*, 50 (1966), p. 25.
  10. See also Michael Gorman's useful comments on the Céranne allusion, in 'Pilgrimage and Myth', *JSAL*, XI, 3-4 (1976), p. 222 fn. 12.
  11. See R. Parthasarathy, 'Foregrounding as an Interpretative Device in Nissim Ezekiel's 'Night of the Scorpion'', *The Literary Criterion*, XI, 3 (1974), p. 44 and *passim*.
  12. In an interview with Anders Jung, Ezekiel explained his belief that 'the goal of life is determined in terms of an individual's understanding and fulfilling his own destiny'. 'L.S.D. The Meaning of Reality', *The Times of India*, 1 December 1968, p. 12.
  13. See Ezekiel, 'Naipaul's India and Mine', p. 204. But cf., V. S. Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization* (New York: Knopf, 1977), p. 191.
  14. In 1973 and 1975 Nissim Ezekiel had two exhibitions: *Poster Poems and Poster Prayers*, respectively, see *JSAL*, pp. 119-31, 133-57).
  15. See also Raja Rao's comments in 'The Writer and the Word', *Critical Essays on Indian Writing*, ed. M. K. Naik, S. K. Desai, G. S. Arun (Dharwad: Karnatak University Press, 1968), p. 561.
  16. *Three Plays* (Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1969), p. 74.
  17. Cf., Kermode, *Wallace Stevens*, p. 37.

# Agha Shahid Ali\*

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## THE SNOW KALI

Once again,

the black goddess turns to snow

in my dream:

the sword in her right hand  
now glass, the empty blood-bowl  
crystallised in her left.

Dream after dream, her red tongue

pales into

the drought of blood in the land  
as skulls fall off her gold chain:

From which emptiness will I hang?

Her veins break like ice.

'Only your blood,' she whispers,  
'will cure this drought.'

O goddess

paled below fahrenheit: I lift  
the sword. Something zero

enters my mouth.

\* In Hindu mythology, Kali, the black goddess, is a manifestation of Devi, the Goddess, the essential form. Kali is associated with death and destruction and is depicted with a necklace of skulls. She holds a sword in her right hand and a bowl filled with blood in her left. Human sacrifices have been made to her even as recently as last year.



## AFTER SEEING KOZINTSEV'S 'KING LEAR' IN DELHI

Lear cries out 'You are men of stones'  
as Cordelia hangs from a broken wall.

I step out into Chandni Chowk street: once  
littered with jasmine-flowers  
for the Empress and the royal women  
who bought perfumes from Isfahan,  
fabrics from Dacca, essence from Kabul,  
glass-bangles from Agra.

Beggars now live here in tombs  
of unknown nobles and forgotten saints  
while hawkers sell combs and mirrors  
outside a Sikh temple. Across the street,  
a theatre is showing a Bombay spectacular.

I think of Zafar, poet  
and Emperor, the last  
of the Mughal dynasty, being led  
through this street by English soldiers,  
his feet in chains, to watch  
his sons hanged.

In exile he wrote: 'I spent  
half my life in hope, the other half  
waiting. I beg for two yards  
of my Delhi for burial.'

He lies buried in Rangoon.

## BIRTHDAY POEM

Thirty this monsoon,  
from the distance of a decade,  
from the longer distance of  
exile, I see my poems still

resurrecting the dead  
who've multiplied like the poor,  
my memory a hurried cemetery  
whose last space my grandfather occupied

as he played Chopin and monsoon-ragas  
with a sapphire needle of rain.  
The earth turned at 78 rpm,

But I flipped the rain,  
the monsoon warped in the sun.  
I slowed the earth down to  
33 rpm,  
and he cursed the altered definitions of Time  
— in Persian, in Urdu, in mouthfuls of Shakespeare.  
When the earth stopped,  
he wound the gramophone.  
But the needle cracked, his stack  
of rare voices broken.

Only his voice remained,  
grating my memory with advice:

Be a Robin Hood of a man.  
Steal from the rich,  
give to the poor.  
Be dangerous, like a legend.

Thirty this monsoon,

I look at my poems:  
No, certainly not the stuff of legends.  
Not even of a rumour.  
Every rumour about me dies.

## The Imperial Heritage in Canadian Prairie Fiction

Canadians are inclined to be apologetic about their colonial past. Take, for example, D.C. Jones's description of the United Empire Loyalists who fled the rebellious Thirteen Colonies: 'For many of the Loyalists Canada was simply the prize of war, the booty prize.'<sup>1</sup> Jones here expresses the ex-colonial's embarrassment over his country's failure to fight for its independence and yet emphasizes the distinctive feature of Canada's colonial past — that its slow emergence into nationhood was the result of a deliberate choice between clear alternatives, to remain in the British Empire or to join its cousins to the south in a free republic. The present consensus is that the choice of Empire, whatever its advantages, has a stultifying effect on the development of the nation's character and culture. Commentators on Canadian literature in particular see the effects of that choice in a persistent 'garrison mentality', a term chosen by Northrop Frye to describe that imperial sense of a beleaguered outpost of civilization clinging to its shreds of alien culture in the face of a barbarous wilderness. The conception has been fruitful in isolating central themes and image patterns in the literature, particularly those expressing responses to an overwhelming natural environment. At a deeper level these thematic studies can even be said to uncover mythological configurations which constitute the imaginative structure underlying Canadian literature. I would not deny that this so-called 'archetypal' approach sponsored by such critics as Frye, Jones, and Margaret Atwood, has led to our most illuminating efforts at a systematic understanding of our literature. At the same time it carries a built-in preoccupation with the limiting effects of Canada's choice of evolutionary rather than revolutionary democracy, as can be seen in even the title of Atwood's main critical work: *Survival*.

I suggest that it is time we escaped this preoccupation by raising questions not about how Canadian literature thematically expresses our

colonial past but how it may have been shaped in form and structure by Canada's peculiar relationship to its origins.

Prairie fiction can be taken as an appropriate if difficult place to begin raising such questions because it is central. As George Woodcock says, it is the prairie novelists who 'are giving form to the great symbols that express the relationship between man and the Canadian land'.<sup>1</sup> Prairie fiction also comes equipped with a close comparison — a control group, if you will — in the fiction of the American West, a region which shares some of its geography but not its origins. Comparisons may derive some clarity from the fact that the two regions represent extremes in the New World experience. The American West (with the exception of the Southwest and the Pacific Coast) had no effective colonial past; the Canadian prairies were doubly colonial. As W. L. Morton explains, the prairie West as developed by Upper Canada suffered the disadvantages of being a colony of a colony.<sup>2</sup>

Comparisons, implicit or explicit, seem unavoidable, the very meaning of 'West' in the Twentieth Century having derived from widely publicized conceptions of the American West. That circumstance has burdened the prairie with the problem of how, given its traditions, it can be 'West' in any recognized sense of the term. The significance of the western frontier has been very different for the two nations. For America, as a revolutionary nation seeking to establish its independence from European cultures, westward expansion was considered the activity in which the character of the new nation would be matured. Long before the writings of Frederick Jackson Turner, America looked to the steadily advancing western frontier for that experience by which they would cease to be Europeans and become Americans. As a result, 'West' and westward movement acquired a weight of emotional, spiritual and political importance. As Richard Slotkin puts it in *Regeneration Through Violence*, in American mythogenesis, the founding fathers were not the eighteenth-century gentlemen in Philadelphia, but the frontiersmen of the West.<sup>3</sup>

Canada, having rejected the American Revolution and accepted the institutions of a mature society, had no interest in a western frontier upon which to mature its culture. Nor was its West a frontier in the sense of a steadily advancing, living edge of the nation's growth; several hundred miles of intractable Precambrian Shield intervened between Central Canada and the arable land of the prairies. The prairie West was therefore developed separately, as a set of remote colonies by the central colonial population of Canada, and rather than looking westward

toward the destiny of the nation it developed looking eastward toward the centres of power. Under such circumstances the direction West and westward movement could develop nothing like the significance they held for the American people.'

The most obvious question to be raised here is whether this basic historical and cultural difference is reflected in the fiction of the two Wests, and specifically in the novelists' use of movement and direction. Not surprisingly, in classic novels of the American West, from Cooper's *The Prairie* to Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* to Clark's *Track of the Cat* or Kerouac's *On the Road*, the journey or quest has been a dominant structural element. Physical movement as metaphor for spiritual change and discovery is particularly emphatic when the movement is westward, the direction in which, as Max Westbrook explains, the American imagination seeks contact with that primal reality which will unify and complete its national psyche.<sup>1</sup> Western heroes such as the mountain men of A.B. Guthrie, Vardis Fisher and Frederick Manfred often literally turn their backs upon the East, the direction of the Old World and the past.

Classic novels of the Canadian prairie are much less likely to have the structure of a journey. This is not as predictable, considering that their earliest models could have been the plentiful travel narratives of explorers, traders, pioneers and cultured visitors to the prairie. Take, for example, such novels as Frederick Philip Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh* and *Fruits of the Earth*, Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* or W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind*. Even though Grove is writing about the immigrant and pioneer experience, his settlers do not travel west; they merely arrive there. Ross's Bentleys have been shifted from one small town parsonage to another, yet the dramatic tensions in the novel are generated not by movement but by the rigid immobility of their lives in Horizon. The railway which runs westward through the town is only an ironic reminder from Mrs Bentley that there is no escape. At the end of the novel the Bentleys intend to move, but back toward civilization, and the way in which they have resolved their domestic problems makes it seem unlikely that any profound spiritual change has taken place. *Who Has Seen the Wind* dramatizes the passage of Mitchell's Brian O'Connell from childhood without the traditional journey motif.

Underlying the fact that journeying could have been but was not chosen as a main narrative strategy in these novels is the less obvious one that movement and westering do not carry the implications they have in American fiction. Flights to the freedom of nature are recognized as illusions. Spiritual growth and revelation do not necessarily lie to the west.

In Brian's development, for example, the eternal prairie of the West is a vital component, but far from turning his back on the East, Brian finds his place in the natural world with the help of his Ontario grandmother from whom he learns the interconnectedness of humanity through time and generations. Like so much of prairie fiction, Mitchell's novel is more time-oriented and therefore more eastward-looking than typical western American novels. Again, the cultural history seems to have its parallel in the structure of the fiction.<sup>7</sup>

It would be difficult to demonstrate that the same distinction persists in immediately contemporary fiction of the two Wests. On both sides of the border the writers exhibit an increased freedom and variety of form. American novelists criticizing the mystique of the frontier, Canadian novelists choosing journeys as a narrative strategy. Yet the westering motif is still the norm from which the American novelist works, and many recent novels such as Edward Abbey's *The Brave Cowboy* and Robert M. Persig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* preserve its assumptions in spirit as well as form. At the same time it could be argued that the imperial heritage continues to have its effect on the structure and imagery of contemporary prairie fiction. Writers such as Rudy Wiebe, Robert Kroetsch and Margaret Laurence, while they may be stringently critical of the colonial past and the history it has passed down, still reject the myth of westering as a way of giving form to prairie experience. As a result, their uses of movement and direction bear a family resemblance to those in the classic prairie novels. I would like to test some of these resemblances in three of their novels, acknowledging at the outset how much of their rich complexity must be overlooked in order to concentrate on this one aspect of movement and direction.

Wiebe is the most explicitly and unequivocally critical of the imperial heritage, yet in narrative structure he shares some of the tendencies of the earlier writers. In *The Temptations of Big Bear*, epic journeys are essential to the story; the space of the western plains is a vital part of its character; the white inhabitants are almost as nomadic as the Indian tribes, yet only one or two sections of the novel draw their narrative continuity from a journey. Wiebe has instead used movement and direction to create a kind of moral geography within which the action takes place. In broadest terms, the West is good but the westward advance of European civilization is evil. It is seen not through the eyes of the settlers moving west into the future but *from* the West looking east, mainly through the eyes of the Cree chief Big Bear and a handful of early pioneers. Missionary John McDougall, for example, counsels the Indians

to sign treaties because he has seen the shape of the future approaching from the East. The eastward looking tendency of the imperial West in Wiebe has led to a way of looking east in anger. Westward expansion is not the pursuit of an ideal or the fulfillment of any individual or national destiny but the single-minded extension of an empire for the sake of power and gain. Even the territorial commissioners in the novel are usually seen in a posture of trying to explain the realities of the West to the centres of power.

Within this moral geography, movement and direction provide the imagery by which Wiebe portrays the collision of White and Indian cultures which lies at the heart of the novel. The progress of white Victorian civilizations, aptly symbolized by the advancing railway, is linear. With survey grids, fortifications, files of troops, houses and towns, it imposes the geometry of European rationalism on the irregular prairie. The movement of the Crees is rounded to the contours of the prairie landscape, their tepee circles, thirst-dance lodges, migrations, ceremonies and ritual movements circular like the cycles of the sun, the seasons, and life itself. The Indian sees no need for the White's restless linear seeking movement when completion is to be achieved by spiritual participation in the great cycles of the earth. Big Bear exemplifies this belief after having run his last buffalo: 'In the circle of sun and sky and earth and death he stood complete ...'

The end of the Indian's hunting culture is signalled when the straight line of the railroad cuts across the cyclical migration path of the buffalo, practically as well as symbolically destroying the completeness of the circle which represents the Indian culture. The Indians lose their land, their freedom of space; they can no longer be as Big Bear, who has 'always moved as far as I wished to see' (p. 29). Yet in the overall moral and metaphysical perspective of the novel, Wiebe will not allow the reality of the Indian's world to be defeated. The spatial movements of the two cultures are related to their perceptions of time, and the Indian's cyclical time comes across as more enduring and more right than the white man's linear time wedded to Victorian ideals of progress toward a technological millennium. The Indian's world is circular, fluid, and eternal; the whiteman's rectilinear world is fixed and impermanent. In a last dream vision Big Bear journeys to the sand hills, the site of the dream vision which gave him his name and his medicine, to complete his own cycle by returning to the earth: 'He felt the granular sand joined by snow running together, against and over him in delicate streams.... gradually (it) rounded him over until there was a tiny mound on the sand hill

almost imperceptible on the level horizon. Slowly, slowly, all changed continually into undistinguishable, as it seemed, and everlasting, unchanging, rock' (p. 415).

The narrative structure of *Big Bear* remains primarily chronological, but Wiebe's moral geography of movement and direction provides much of the dramatic structure, drawing lines across which the generative tensions of the action develop. Wiebe's rejection of the American westering ideal and the Canadian colonial tradition is deepened by the imagery of lines and circles. Westering is condemned as a type of the restless seeking through space of western European culture. The Indian's ritual circular movement is a negation of that and an assertion that spiritual completion is to be found by a proper relation to the place in which you live.

Robert Kroetsch might at first seem un-Canadian in his preoccupation with space. His narratives are frequently built around journeys or quests in which direction has implications closely related to those in American fiction. At the same time he is the writer most expressly devoted to finding a fictional form appropriate to the experience of the prairie West, and his use of journey motifs is usually ironic. The novel which focuses most pointedly on the westering ideal is *Gone Indian*, a post-realist novel which has not had the critical attention it deserves. Its hero, Jeremy Sadness, is a graduate student from New York afflicted with an absurd version of the classic American split between the rational and instinctual selves, to wit, when he lies down he becomes impotent because he knows he should be up writing his dissertation. He also has the classic American faith in the regenerative power of the West. Like the traditional western hero, he seeks a primal reality (to use Westbrook's phrase) which will restore his fragmented psyche, his ego, and his freedom. In the West a man can be reborn into a new individuality, like Jeremy's boyhood idol 'Grey Owl', actually an Englishman named Archy Belaney who disappeared into the Canadian wilderness and emerged to pass himself off as an Indian. When Jeremy is sent to Alberta for a job interview, he begins to imitate his idol, to 'go Indian' in a sequence of surrealistic episodes which take him back into the pre-history of the prairies.

The outcome strongly suggests that Jeremy has carried his quest into the wrong fictional West. First, instead of a new individuality, Jeremy acquires a series of shifting identities, eventually vanishing (like the Red Man) into the spaces of the northern prairie. His professor, the narrator of his story, refers to 'the consequences of the northern prairies to human definition: the diffusion of personality into a complex of possibilities



rather than a concluded self.<sup>3</sup> In the chaos of unbordered space he has strayed into. Jeremy loses rather than finds himself. Second, the primal reality Jeremy finally encounters at the end of his quest is not the vegetable nature or chaste virgin land of western myth but woman, in the form of a powerful earth-mother figure who seduces him in a dark and tangled garden inside a house called 'World's End'. Jeremy recognizes the inevitability of this outcome, calling it 'the Columbus quest for the oldest New World. The darkest gold. The last first' (p. 147). The quest has been circular, bringing him back to beginnings. Jeremy provides an apt image of his questing self as he approaches the final meeting, likening himself to a man lost in a blizzard:

... always the lost man circling blindly, come back upon himself ... finding himself only, his own tracks mocking him ... the dark labyrinth becomes a place of phantasma and feared imaginings ... possessed by a shuddering dread ... the endless circle has end ... (p. 144 (his ellipses))

The imagery not only describes the quest but prefigures its sexual outcome. Third, Jeremy's encounter with a primal reality has led not to freedom but to subjection to the oldest primal necessities. Yet it has brought him a kind of wholeness, evidenced in his regained sexual potency, and he refers to himself as 'the free man freed from his freedom'. The phrase is paradoxical, suggesting that along with his loss of self the experience has produced not freedom of ego but freedom *from* ego. He feels freed too from 'locomotion', presumably the linear questing of the conscious ego.

The delusory nature of the westering quest implied in the figure of Jeremy as a Columbus reaching 'World's End' is reinforced by Jeremy's subsequent recognition, embodied in a first line he composes for a dissertation he will never complete: 'Christopher Columbus, not knowing that he had not reached the Indies of his imagination. Imagined he had reached the Indies' (p. 149).

*Gone Indian*, despite its journey motifs, is as much a critique of the westering myth as Wiebe's *Big Bear*, and Kroetsch's use of an American protagonist throws a peculiarly intimate light upon it. It has the effect of denying the Canadian West to alien myths which do not properly represent its distinctive past, its spirit or its power. While Wiebe's critique is in ethical terms, Kroetsch's is in epistemological: a question not of why westering is wrong but of how the westering myth prevents us from knowing what we are doing, here, in this particular West.

In Margaret Laurence's novels the paradoxes of the westering motif

are nearer to those in the earlier classics of prairie fiction. For Laurence's heroines, westward movement is often an ideal or a promised solution, but because it constitutes flight, it is usually futile, like the restless movement of Ross's Bentleys, who continually encounter only their own unresolved problems. In *The Diviners* Laurence develops her greatest range of implications for movement and direction. Her narrator, Morag Gunn, is more a traveller through time than space as she reflects upon her past, but her life is marked by a series of major east-west journeys which carry metaphorical significance. Morag, a middle-aged novelist, feels compelled to recreate her past partly in the hope of helping her teen-aged daughter find a place in the cycle of generations. Morag herself, in the true colonial tradition, has been raised on the thinning edge of civilization in small-town Manitoba, orphaned and starved for a cultural past. Her imagination has had to reconcile three contending traditions expressed in history books from Ontario, legends of Scottish ancestors told by her foster father, Christie, and ballads of a Métis hero, 'Rider Tonnere', sung by the French mixed-bloods who are the truly indigenous people of Manitoba. Her daughter Pique is an expression of this tangled and conflicting heritage, being the illegitimate child of Morag Gunn and Jules Tonnere, and growing up in Ontario.

Morag's first independent act, again typically colonial, is to reject her real background, marry an English English professor, and move to Toronto. This first movement, eastward toward the centre of power and of an English culture which is only superficially her own is doomed, because in denying her personal past she is rejecting too much that is vitally a part of her. Her true spirit rebels in the form of creative energies which destroy her sterile marriage. After publishing a novel and conceiving a child by Jules, Morag makes her second major journey, westward to British Columbia. This is again an effort to escape, and the direction is automatic. As Morag says, she cannot explain it, except 'maybe it only ever occurs to prairie people, when they light out, to go yet further west'.<sup>10</sup> But westering, tempting as it may be, is no more efficacious here than in Wiebe or Kroetsch. Like Laurence's earlier heroines, Morag takes the past with her in the form of her unborn child. The main effect of the movement is to convince her that she must face her past.

Morag's next journey, eastward to England and Scotland is not a flight but a seeking, a quest for her ancestral past. Especially in Scotland she seeks the roots denied her by her orphaned childhood, but when faced with the highland countryside she realizes, 'It's a deep land here, all right, but it's not mine, except a long long way back. I always thought it

was the land of my ancestors, but it is not' (p. 319). That is, it is not the land of Christie's legends. As she says, 'The myths are my reality'. Her journeys reveal that 'eastering' is no more effective in reaching the past than westering in reaching the future, because the past, especially for a displaced colonial people, has no physical habitation. The real past exists mythically, and directions of movement have only mythic significance. Thus, when she returns westward, Morag does not go to Manitoba but settles in rural Ontario where she can find 'Land. A river. Log house nearly a century old, built by great pioneering couple, Simon and Sarah Cooper. History. Ancestors' (p. 338). There, in a semi-mythic environment, she can work in the proper dimension, the creative imagination, to recover her real roots, her personal mythology which gives meaning to her life and relates it to the wider world.

It is from this vantage point that Morag hopes to guide Pique, who is beginning her own search for roots or ancestors. For Pique, however, West is the direction of the past, the Manitoba she knows only from her mother's stories and her father's songs, and while Morag knows that the girl's past exists not in Manitoba but in the songs and stories themselves, she realizes that this is not something she can pass on to the next generation. All she can pass on to her daughter is the search itself. Pique must discover her own personal mythology.

*The Dishmors* closes, as it opened, with the image of a river outside Morag's pioneer farmhouse. The image draws attention to relationships between movement, direction and time, but not in the usual way, because the river flows both ways:

The waters flowed from north to south, and the current was visible, but now a south wind was blowing, ruffling the water in the opposite direction, so that the river, as so often here, seemed to be flowing both ways.

Look ahead into the past, and back into the future, until the silence (p. 378)

This metaphor and statement are suggestive in several ways. Personally Morag moves in two directions at once as she strives to recreate her own past, for that past is yet before her until imaginatively completed. Once created it gives shape and meaning to her future. In that respect she looks back into the future. In another sense Morag, while looking into Pique's future, sees her own past repeated, while in her own past she sees the inevitable lines of Pique's future. Movements through space acquire equally paradoxical significance as Pique is last seen travelling west to the inevitable discovery that the past is not there, just as Morag once found that the past was not to the east.

These three novels are perhaps too diverse in their use of direction and movement to generalize about with confidence, but that is my point. If the imperial heritage has denied prairie writers the shared tradition of a westering motif, with its absorbing narrative structure and its classic directional metaphor, it has also freed them to develop a rich and diverse sense of symbolic movement in their novels. If there is a common quality which they share with earlier writers, it is a certain scepticism about westward migrations, a consistent awareness of the ironies and the paradoxes involved in journeying toward spiritual regeneration. And the structure and imagery of the fiction expresses this quality well. If, as Leslie Fiedler says, 'America had been unremittingly dreamed from East to West as a testament to the original goodness of man',<sup>11</sup> then the Canadian West has been part of a more sophisticated dream.

#### NOTES

1. *Butterfly on Rock* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 36.
2. *The Canadian Imagination*, ed. David Staines (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 85.
3. *Glimpse in Canada: The Interpretation of Canadian History*, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XV (3), April, 1946.
4. *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1933), p. 4.
5. I discuss this distinction at greater length in *Unsettled Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1977), Chapter III and VI.
6. *Walter Van Tilburg Clark* (New York: Twayne, 1969), p. 47.
7. See also Eli Mandel, 'The Border League: American «West» and Canadian «Region» in Crossing Frontiers: Papers in American and Canadian Western Literature', ed. Dick Harrison (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1979), pp. 105-121.
8. *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1933, rpt., Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1936), p. 129. Subsequent quotations are from this edition.
9. *Gone Indian* (Toronto: New Press, 1973), p. 152. Subsequent quotations are from this edition.
10. *The Drivers* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 226. Subsequent quotations are from this edition.
11. *An End to Innocence: Essays on Culture and Politics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), p. 132.

# Robert Kroetsch

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## INTERVIEW

Flemming Brahm interviewed Robert Kroetsch in Calgary on 6 October 1979.

*After several years of teaching and writing in the States you have returned to your native province and now call Calgary your home. You've been writing about Alberta for many years: why is it important for you to come back right now? Is this a new phase in your writing?*

Yes, I do feel that I'm entering a new stage. I wrote from outside my material for years, and at this point I want to try writing about a place while I'm living in it. It has been a very traumatic experience for me coming back and trying to combine art and life.

*What are the difficulties?*

A sense of complication, for one thing. You know, you get so close to the material that the sense of design vanishes a little bit. So I have the sense of a large amount of material and no controlling shape.

*Has your coming back got anything to do with developments in the Canadian literary scene: is it more attractive to be back in Canada?*

Yes, I think it's a much more attractive place to live for a writer, in that you have a community. On the other hand I think that we're at a point where Canadian writing is going to start looking out toward the world much more. I think there was a period of consolidation that took place, and that's over.

*How do you view that phase of nationalism now? You've been attacked, for instance by Robin Mathews, for writing 'American' novels. The one he mentions is *Gone Indian*. Were you exploring the national differences*

*between Americans and Canadians when you had this 'U.S. anarchist individualist' coming up to Edmonton looking for Grey Owl?*

Yes, I was interested in different mythologies, if you will, at that point in my life. And also, the way we read each other's mythologies is important. I think nationalism is a very significant factor in our lives at this point. But I think that it's how you deal with it that matters. Robin Mathews is very narrow and insecure in his way of approaching it.

*Do you feel that the emphasis in Robin Mathews's essays on community as a defining factor in the Canadian identity is a useful thing?*

Yes, I think that's one of the very basic dichotomies in Canadian life and fiction. It's that terrible tension between community and self. In American culture often the individual comes out as being ultimately superior to the community. Whereas I think that in Canada there's more of a draw, in the sense that one is just about as important as the other.

*Is there any other term that you would suggest as a key to a definition of national identity?*

Well, that's what we're busy looking for. I believe it comes back finally to storytelling and what stories we tell and re-tell in a culture. Every telling demands another telling, there gets to be a web, a connected group of stories, and you look for patterns inside that. I certainly wouldn't want to over-stress that community/self notion. I think there are others that may turn out to be every bit as important.

*There's something else that I've been wondering about: we get all these terms thrown around, like 'survival' and 'garrison mentality'; isn't that kind of fixed definition ultimately an improper thing to use in connection with something that is essentially dynamic?*

Exactly. And you see, that's why I think that new cities like Saskatoon and Calgary are exciting and important. In a sense those cities are texts that you can read, and often it's this whole disregard for the past, the sense of a kind of wild optimism, a sense of vulgarity, a sense of self-seeking, that make them fascinating cities to read.

*You're concerned with formulating authentic or indigenous myths for your own community. But it seems to me that maybe there is a kind of stasis built into the myth itself.*

Yes, I certainly think you have to avoid that stasis. Any myth that makes you complacent is in a sense a bad story. I think that can happen in a culture. That's why you have to re-tell stories all the time, in a sense to keep opening them up. That's why we need new writers. The critical act, at its best, is an opening up rather than a closing.

*There are quite a few echoes of Greek myths in your writing. In The Studhorse Man, for instance. The narrator/biographer in that novel tries to impose mythical identities and patterns on his protagonist and his experiences. You call him Demeter Proudfoot: why is that sexual inversion important there?*

Well, first of all, I think Greek myth gave us certain paradigms, certain models, that we keep playing with over and over: the wandering hero, the father son family relationship, and so on. And then the Demeter thing: I think one of the characteristics of the prairie culture has been an incredibly sharp definition of male and female, almost to the exclusion of each other; and I have in the figure of Demeter somebody who's androgynous.

*You've talked before about the pressure of the past, the literary Tradition with a capital T, on the writer, and you once said, 'Much as I admire The Odyssey, I want to get free of it, I want to get loose, and to do it I re-tell the story, I re-enact it in my own way.' That's more or less what you've been saying now. But why do you still have to re-tell that story? It seems to me that you are in a way caught within the premises there. Perhaps you would be better off outside those premises?*

Well, even Homer was just telling his story to a particular audience in a particular place. The fact that we're reading it hundreds or thousands of years later is an accident that really didn't interest him. I suppose. It's the problem of beginnings, isn't it? You both have to recognize a beginning, a place, and be free of it. It's that paradox. So I use Greek mythology, and Homer especially, as a beginning place. But if I stop there, I become static again. I can only both honour it and free myself by a re-telling.

*Another of the important ingredients in your writing is the tall tale. Could you say something about that?*

Yes, the tall tale is very much a part of our local tradition, and I do believe that you work out of a local, too, you see. You use Homer on one hand, but on the other hand you're using a very local sense of story-telling. And in any kind of frontier world, or semi-frontier, you get a great use of the tall tale.

*You said once, talking about the first-person narrative, that 'we're reduced to private visions in our time, and there's no longer a trust in the shared, the community vision'. Isn't the tall tale often a kind of community vision?*

Yes, I think I would back down a little bit on that. I think the tall tale is very much a shared tradition, because you distort the individual away from anything particular towards a universalized notion. And I also think the stories themselves are often going back into the body of stories that we have. The giant of the past is related to the great hunter of the present.

*So the tall tale, you could say, is one of the tools that you employ in order to break up a literary form that is more or less fixed. Would you agree with that?*

Absolutely, including a deconstruction of notions of realism, I think.

*But it seems to me that the tall tale is also very often a repository of very prejudiced and narrow-minded responses to reality.*

Oh, absolutely. And that's why, you see, that you have to treat them in such a way that the reader sees both sides of them. The tool, too, has to be broken up while you're using it.

*There's a sense of 'back to basics' in your work. One of your collections of poetry is called *The Ledger*, and another one is *Seed Catalogue*. Could you comment upon that listing or cataloguing instinct?*

Sure. You know, I'm very much interested in that 'back to basics' thing you talk about. Again, where do we begin from? Obviously one of the



places is the catalogue, in the listing of names or objects. But then it's the interrelationship that starts to produce the poem, isn't it? There's always a sub-text, I think. Beneath a text is a sub-text, and often it's another literary text, like Homer: but often it *isn't* a literary text: often it's a very sub-literary text — the tall tale that's told locally.

*Eaton's catalogue?*

Eaton's catalogue! In Canadian literature I'm sure you can do a thesis on the mail-order catalogue as a sub-text in terms of fantasy, of hope, of education — and depiction.

*We've used the term de-construction. You're very fond of such terms: 'de-creating', 'de-composing', 'de-mythologizing', 'un-naming', 'un-inventing', 'un-writing', and 'dis-covering'. Can you elaborate a bit further on why they are so absolutely essential?*

Well, I guess that I feel that in a new world, such as we have here on the prairies, we encounter a pattern of naming that doesn't quite fit. The names don't fit the experiences. So one of the things we have to do is, at least temporarily, let go of the names, you see. So that we have a chance to examine the relationship between the name and what is named. 'Signifier and signified', as we like to say nowadays. And how do you do that? Again, by hearing that space, by hearing how it doesn't fit, you create room to write again. It's that destructive element of creativity, isn't it?

*You once talked about the danger of de-construction, of writing 'the essential novel'. And you called it 'The final victory of form itself. A platonic form emerging as the quidditas'. And then you went on to say, 'One is tempted to rush out of the garden and into the bush'. What did you mean by that?*

Well, I think one of the dangers of de-construction, of getting back to a structuralist notion, is that there is a pattern there; and if there's simply a pattern, then the pattern takes over. So you have to go back into the chaos again. If you take a garden as a pattern, it seems to me the idea of garden always has to emerge from the wilderness that surrounds it. And then you have to go back to the wilderness to refresh it. That's a form of un-naming, isn't it? In Canada we have that curious use of the English kind of garden that you see in public places, whether it's Niagara Falls or

wherever. The kind of garden they make, as if they had never seen North America, is a kind of grotesque mis-naming. They suit a European highly urbanized landscape beautifully where the garden is set against an urban world, the squares in London or whatever. But here the garden is kind of grotesque.

*Can we talk about the question of literary perception and literary realism as conventions? You've moved away from conventional realism in your novels. How do you go beyond these conventions without losing contact with the 'ordinary reader' which is where the tall tale came from? There seems almost to be an element of betrayal there.*

I'm not really interested in straight fantasy. I want a tension to exist between what we call realistic detail and the ways of perceiving. The tall tale is *one* way of perceiving. The sonnet is another. The function of literary form is neglected sometimes, or made too simple. The experimental novel, for instance, Ondaatje's work, has a very fragmented form because it's a distrust of that overpowering form, that complete form.

*Let's go back to the question of male and female. Most of your protagonists are male, and talking about Dick Harrison's book on prairie literature, Unnamed Country, you have said, 'The world does not end. It's hard to make a literature out of that realization. But at least the father disappears. And that, out west (as opposed to down east), makes everything possible.' In Badlands there's a female protagonist who goes searching for her father. Why is this disappearing father so important?*

Well, 'the father' is really a metonymy, or whatever. It represents the whole tradition in a sense, the past literary tradition, the systems of value. And I just noticed that in Canadian writing, I think actually Harrison makes that observation himself, the father somehow has to disappear. The child has to be orphaned, in a sense, to be able to recover the world. *The Diviners* by Margaret Laurence would be a great example of this. Morag is an orphan. There's that curious powerful sense of her being orphaned early, so she can make the discoveries.

*But why not 'the mother', or why not 'the parents'? In terms of socializing functions, certainly, the woman is often regarded as perhaps the major influence.*

I never thought about that, really. That's a good question. Because the mother, say in *As For Me and My House*, is really a pretty terrible figure. The boy remembers her almost as a prostitute, doesn't he? But she's there, she doesn't vanish. I don't know: maybe that ties back, finally, to the notion of muse. You know, that you have to confront the female. Maybe to kill off the mother is to be annihilated. Maybe it's even more in that sense.

*Is that the kind of thing you're talking about when you talk about the 'erotics of space'?*

Well, I was also talking about that fear of going into the house, in a sense, where the woman is. Where she *is* the power. The male staying out on the edge so much, thinking of himself as an outlaw or an orphan, a cowboy, or whatever — where he doesn't have to enter into feminine space.

*What of space itself: can you say something about the importance you attach to that? It's certainly something that haunts prairie writers, and in a book like Laurie Ricaou's Vertical Man/ Horizontal World it is almost the sole important fact.*

Again, I think it's a problem of tradition. Our literature comes often from an urbanized world, or from a forested world even, so that the prairie space was something that European writing hadn't dealt with. There's very little writing that deals with something like that. — Unless you take sea literature, and that's quite a different thing because you get the microcosm of the boat right away. In a sense we're talking about a grammar of fiction, you know, the kind of basic elements you use to write, and we don't have those elements, quite often, for dealing with *this* kind of space. The first writers into the culture have to deal with that. I think some of them just pretend it isn't a problem, but good ones have, somebody like Suknaski inventing his Wood Mountain, anchoring himself by insisting on the validity of a place in space.

*But then it's not just a place — it's a peopled place. And sometimes we lose track of the fact that, actually, there are people out there, not only looking at that space, but living in it, and going about the business of constructing their own life*

Yes, but you see, I think the writers born here now are not so appalled by that space. I think the first generation, often from Ontario or England, were sort of appalled. You still meet tourists who say that across the prairies there was nothing to see. And I'm so busy looking, I see so much crossing the prairies that I hate to hurry. We tend to close spaces, don't we? So that we can understand them. And this space is so much without boundary — *that's* one of the things that made people so appalled.

*Something that interested me when I read Harrison's book were all the examples he had of the early people who came out, explorers and so on, who didn't really notice it. It was only later that it really struck.*

You know, I think the first explorers literally couldn't see the space. Mackenzie, for instance. I suppose some of the people who were surveyors began to see it, but they saw it in terms of a problem of surveying. The problem of the homesteaders is an interesting one, because they often dealt with it by this marvellous thing of dividing the land into quarter sections. You had a very manageable plot which you began to manipulate. Again, a kind of garden form, wasn't it, inside a space? It must have been a very difficult act on their parts to begin to perceive that it is beautiful. Some of them obviously did. Compare the Ontario landscape: the notion of beauty there, of trees and ponds and streams and so on, is incredibly different.

*That brings us back to 'out west' in contrast to 'down east': It seems that we're moving away from nationalism into regionalism as a key issue in Canadian criticism.*

It is a key issue in a certain sense, because patterns of perception are determined; for example in the Maritimes the community is often very small in terms of geography. Here you've come from Saskatoon to Calgary, and that is hundreds of miles, and we don't really stop and say, "That's a long way." You know, we have a very different sense of distance, and that makes a lot of difference. I think it makes prairie people open to the world in a different way. There are economic factors too: if you have to sell wheat in China you get interested in China.

*How do you relate the importance of regionalism to what you were saying earlier about Canadian literature opening up and being much more open to a larger world? Is it paradoxical?*

It is, and I'm not so sure that regional is going to work as a unit finally. You might have to go to smaller units on one hand, to where people literally live together. Saskatoon is a culture; Winnipeg is a culture; even the small towns are cultures. I wonder sometimes if 'regional' isn't a kind of arbitrary invention based pretty much on economic needs. But then you can go from that very local thing to a much larger landscape, because of television, film, because of travel. I wouldn't because I'm more interested in the local.

*Could you say a few words about your latest book, What the Crow Said?*

Well, I suppose in *What the Crow Said* — to relate back to what we've been saying — on the one hand I took the tall tale about as far as I think I can take it. In a sense, to use that word, I de-constructed the tall tale for myself. I really see nowhere to go with the tall tale beyond that. And maybe that's one of the reasons why I'm back in Calgary, sort of to re-confront the material. The second thing is that in *What the Crow Said* I was really pushing that dream of origins as far as I could go. And I think there's a kind of cliché notion in Canadian culture that we have a dream of origins in Europe. But in fact most people know very little about their European origins. Their dream of origins has been an oral tradition, and it goes back, you know, maybe only two generations. You know your grandparents, but there is a pretty slim chance of knowing your great-grandparents. Now, on the prairies the dream has become of that pioneering generation, people who went out to homesteads, to small towns. And they will always be there in a sense.

*They're the Adams and Eves of the prairies?*

Exactly. And I think I played with that very much in *What the Crow Said*.



Prairie scene, Canada. Photo: John de Visser.



Prairie scene, Canada. Photo: John de Visser

# Robert Kroetsch

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## ZOO POEM 2

this is, rather, a prose piece on zoos, their nouns, their verbs: zoo

to ape:           Ape. To ape is/to ape, don't monkey  
                    around. God's fool, the poet. God fools  
                    the poet. Aping.

to bear:           Arktos, bear. The Great Bear, zodiacal.  
                    Great Bear Lake. Arcturus, bear-guardian.  
                    The Arctic. Bear with me. Winter in  
                    Winnipeg. Bear up.

to crow:           as in nothing to/about. To eat. As the  
                    crow flies. Crownest. STOP (crowing).

to fox:           Dumb like a. Sly as. The page itself,  
                    (out)foxed. The beer, foxy. To goose/you/  
                    goose.

to horse:           Around. See under Wooden. Odin. Or  
                    flogging a dead. Or another colour. A  
                    gift horse in. Hold. The cart before.  
                    A dark. The Pale. But you can  
                    make him drink.

to lion:           eyes. Leo. The fifth. At the throat of  
                    the (lunar) bull. Or into: the mouth of.  
                    His share. Got. Gate.

to skunk:           You win. I lose. You skunk. (You stink.)



to snake:     - it, down off the mountain, the tree. The  
lot. Or, across, or. In the grass. Not  
Eaton's, Eden. Or the other side/of  
(Rattlesnake Coulee) Medicine Hat.

to wolf:       the wolf-month, January. Don't cry. To  
keep the/from the door. Or in sheep's  
clothing. Fenrir, the wolf of Loki, one  
jaw touching earth, the other, heaven.  
Don't wolf your food. Please.

## CALGARY LOVER

And me,  
I shoot roses.

Holding the barrel to each blossom,  
I touch the trigger  
as if it might be a thorn.

The petals take flight at the whispered  
blast.

I protect myself from the tongues  
of outraged women

: by wearing a parka  
: by growing pineapples  
in Pincher Creek  
: by hanging a black cape  
over the canary's cage  
: by sleeping in a highrise  
: by eating peanut butter

(it must contain  
no words. It must be pure.  
It must allow

nothing.)

I carry a gun  
on the rack  
in the cab of my pickup

I shoot roses  
on sight

## CALGARY MORNING

Once I was happy  
Once I made love to a pterodactyl,  
but that was before I was born.  
Once the silver knife of day  
cut my umbilical  
dreaming.

I protect myself from the mouths  
of disappointed mothers

by floating across the city  
under a yellow balloon.

By peeking into  
chimneys.  
By photographing fish  
from the air.  
By eating  
avocados.

By waving at graveyards  
and pregnant wives  
By talking to passing  
pigeons.  
By spreading peanut butter  
on my left hand.

The children reach up  
to the start of the sun.  
They lift the earth  
beneath them.



## An Herbal Meditation with Bob Marley

mudk of blood  
black seated  
pain rooted  
heart geared;

all tensed up  
in the bubble an the bounce  
an the leap an the weight-drop.

it is the beat of the heart,  
this pulsing of blood  
that is a bubbling bass,  
a bad bad beat  
pushin against the wall  
why has black blood.

an is a whole heappa  
passion a gather  
like a frightful form  
like a righteous harm  
giving off wild like is madness

Linton Kwesi Johnson<sup>1</sup>

The Jamaican reggae beat has had a major impact on global popular music during the last fifteen years and carried along on that lurching, jerking rhythm is the message of the oppressed black masses of Jamaica which has touched the hearts and minds of millions of blacks and whites worldwide.

The significance of reggae in Jamaica extends beyond its importance as an export commodity. Reggae music has had a galvanizing effect on the poor and illiterate in the ghettos of Kingston. The Rastafarian millennial cult has effectively utilized reggae in the propagation of their

message of black awareness, faith in Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia (christened Ras Tafari) as the Second Coming of Christ, and the prospect of repatriation to Africa.

In Jamaican politics reggae songs carry incalculable clout. After ten years of rule by the conservative Jamaican Labour Party, led, curiously enough, by former record producer Edward Seaga, Michael Manley's democratic socialist People's National Party turned the tables in 1972 on the strength of Manley's association with the Rastafarian movement and through the popularity of two reggae singles, Max Romeo's 'Let the Power Fall' and Delroy Wilson's 'Better Must Come'.

For the 1976 election Wilson recorded 'Heavy Manners' and Manley enlisted the aid of Bob Marley and the Wailers who boosted the PNP with a suitably optimistic single, 'Smile Jamaica' and a live appearance at a mass rally and free concert. In a brutal climax to the election campaign conducted during a prolonged state of emergency, Marley's Island House on Hope Road was attacked three days before the concert by machine-gun toting hoods who put two bullets in Marley and five in his manager. The concert went on as scheduled, Manley increased his parliamentary majority, and Marley went into a voluntary exile which lasted until early 1979.

Bob Marley has almost single-handedly made reggae a force to be reckoned with in world music. And contact with reggae has heightened the consciousness of blacks and whites alike who would otherwise never have been able to find Jamaica on the map.

Marley is widely regarded as a Third World revolutionary artist with a no-compromise stance, although this view is not easily reconciled with the arcane dogma of the Rasta faith. While it is true that Rasta discards the pie-in-the-sky promise with which Christianity has traditionally placated the classes in a society which were denied power, wealth, security, opportunity and position in this life,

We're sick and tired of your 'im-ahim game  
to die and go to heaven in Jesus' name.<sup>3</sup>

it is also true that Rastafarians refuse to mobilize their considerable forces in any concrete political endeavour, claiming that politics and the affairs of the material world are beneath contempt. 'I am in this world, but I am not of this world', as Bob Marley put it when I spoke to him. But Rasta doctrine and reggae songs are also shot through with pacifying 'God will provide' and 'Keep the faith and humble yourself' sentiments

which are a crippling residue of the Old Testament teachings which form the basis of Rastafarianism. In Marley's powerful song about the failed assassination attempt he sees the assault as politically motivated, yet his reaction is essentially a religious one.

See them fighting for power  
But they know not the hour  
So they bribing with  
Their guns, spare-parts and money...  
Trying to belittle our integrity.  
They say what we know  
Is just what they teach us;  
We're so ignorant,  
Every time they can reach us...  
Through political strategy  
They keep us hungry.  
When you gotta get some food  
Your brother got to be your enemy...

Ambush in the night  
All guns aiming at me  
Ambush in the night  
They opened fire on me  
Ambush in the night  
*Protected by His Majesty*

Well, what we know  
Is not what they tell us.  
We're not ignorant, I mean it  
And they just could not teach us.  
*Through the powers of the Most High*  
*We keep on surfacing*  
*Through the powers of the Most High*  
*We keep on surfacing*

I talked to Bob Marley at 1:30 in the morning after a gruelling two-hour performance for a crowd of 5,000. I discovered very quickly that Marley as a Rastaman is ill-equipped to deal with the concrete concerns of daily life. My questions of a specific, political nature or on the hard facts of the notorious business practices in the reggae industry were evaded by recourse to cryptic, evangelical talking in tongues, Marley playing his favourite role, the Prophet, most ludicrously at the end of the interview in his message to the world.

But first I would like to preface the interview with a few remarks on the highly stylized Jamaica Talk which almost every street-wise Jamaican

commands.

Language is almost inevitably a barrier to the proper appreciation of Third World texts, and this state of affairs is aggravated when the language involved is a 'deviant' pidgin or creole variety of English. Journalists Cathy McKnight and John Tobler typify the blinkered perspective employed when they assert in their book on Bob Marley that 'reggae lyrics are all too often incomprehensible to the average listener'.<sup>5</sup> If the average reggae listener is correctly identified as a black Jamaican living in the same environment as the performer, rather than a white middle-class Englishman, then the absurdity of this statement becomes obvious. The monolingual Englishman might as well claim that Borges is 'incomprehensible to the average reader' because he writes in Spanish.

Language as pure sound and conversation as a fine art are highly valued in Jamaica and the outsider must come to terms with the niceties and vagaries of Jamaica Talk. The necessity of a purely Jamaican mode of English and the joy and anguish of struggling with language are often commented on by Jamaicans.

Me hear sey de Jamaican Union ob Teachers hab one agiment bout de English langwidge as it peak out yah.

Dem say sence ah de only langwidge we peak we ought to peak it prapa. Me barn in English colony, so ah wha dem expect me fe peak but English; an me lub it so, specially de big wud dem. Some ob dem mos brok me jaw bone fe pronounce, an tek heaby consideration fe pell dem put ah letter.<sup>6</sup>

To explain Isfelf with writing upon paper. It is something special. You have to feel it. You see the word. You hear the sound. Not in agreement with de English language. Jah Ugiman. I cannot spell. I spell too well. Through the power of the Most High, I write as de voice inside.

Talking a nuh good English. Is not good English. It is not good English. Dem claim say it haad fe undastan simple because dem waan yu fe be a black Englishman an chat like dem. Waan rob yu of yu culcha. Well who cyaan undastan get fuk. I cannot spell to fool Isfelf.

'Who cyaan undastan get fuk' (Fuck you if you can't understand) puts less fine a point on it than the traditional Jamaican sentiment, 'Who feels it, knows it' which neatly sums up the natural, taken-for-granted non-analytic attitude of the Jamaican to life in general. These issues should be kept in mind, as you read Marley's words.

Bob Marley is no mere soap-box religious fanatic. He is indisputably the most widely-known and most influential Third World figure on the international scene. It was therefore fitting that Bob Marley and the Wailers were the special guests of Robert Mugabe at Zimbabwe's independence celebrations.

Zimbabwe was nice, y'know. It was a great experience, mahn, to really see and behold what happened at that special moment of time. We go all over the place, mahn, we play music, we was all over. Zimbabwe was like our home. We play two shows for a whole heap of people. Some of them didn' even know what was happening, because it was nothing that was advertised. The people just hear about it and come, which is very nice. Them was ready for the music, especially the revolutionary musics.

*You once said that your new, modern recording studio would open up the music, bring it to the people, and help the artists get their fair share. How are you doing that?*

Well, the studio's there, y'know. It's only that the way the business go in Jamaica — Jamaica is a small place. Over the years we wasn't a record company that we could really handle people stuff, but we could help within the music. If a man come and want a good studio to work in, y'know, a cheaper studio. We manufacture the record, too, and we distribute people record. But sometime it become too much of a business. I can't deal with it because I love the artistic part more than the business.

*But somebody has to take care of business.*

Well, yes. I hope so. (laughs)

*Reggae used to be a real rip-off business, people being cheated left, right, and centre. Are things improving?*

Oh, mahn, well, no, the robbery is getting more international now. I think when I check it out. The robbery is starting to leave Jamaica and get multi-national.

*How does that work?*

I don't even know myself, because I am in this world, but I am not of this



world, so of these things I know not.

*Do you believe that you're being robbed internationally?*

Oh, mahn, from I am here in Babylon, I have been robbed, robbed of my culture, robbed of my blood, sweat, and tears. Is only one thing them couldn't rob is your soul, 'cause that was there always, but when you come to robbery, mahn, let's not talk about robbery because 'Old pirates, yes, they rob I, sold I to the merchant ships'. You remember that?

*I do remember that. But, tell me, you've been in this business nearly twenty years; are you still being robbed?*

Listen, mahn, how can you ever stop a robber? A robber is a robber, mahn. A robber can stick you up and take it. If the message get through to the people, I am not robbed. If the message don't get through, we've been robbed.

*Your reward is that the message gets through, even if somebody else gets all the money?*

Regardless how it hurt, the message is the most important thing. Somebody always get the money. Somebody ah get that piece of lead or that piece of silver and put it into that thing and stamp it with somebody face on it. But as soon as you start loving money, you start looking like the guy on it. If a man live with a woman for a long, long time, he start looking like the woman or the woman start looking like him, but there is something that make it happen. What I'm saying is if you love money too much you start looking like the man on the money. (laughs)

*You say you don't deal in politics, yet you wrote 'Smile Jamaica' and campaigned for Manley at the last election.*

Oh, mahn, I campaigned for Manley? I never campaigned for anyone.

*You were on stage with him once.*

*On stage with him once?*

*Just before the election.*

That was when?

76.

Aw, ohh, politicians have a way of putting themself in mysterious places, mahn. You be onstage, y'know, a guy can just come onstage, a politician, the people see you onstage. You can't really start a fight, you have to act like a human being and the people might figure, 'Oh, it's friends'. We never defend politics, we are Rastas, mahn. Politics is made to fight against Rasta, not for Rasta to be in politics and fight against himself.

*You don't think Rastas could use politics in Jamaica?*

I don't know. The politics they are talking about is corruption, that is not politics.

*What would be the right politics?*

ONE WORLD GOVERNMENT, RASTAFARI. That is where we're coming from. Them there little small thing fe kill people, that is devilism. This earth, this world is a big world, mahn. We're talking about world conflicts, world happenings. That is the most important thing, because all of these little things is happening in the countries, that is just coming from headquarters and tell them to do it. There's a head-quarter that operate those damned things.

*How does Rasta work for one world government?*

Because Rasta himself is the world government. We are the peoples forming the new world government, Christ government that shall rule earth and if you think that is lie, look at it like this; you see the Beast is forming, you see all the countries ready. As we hear *Revolutions* telling, in this time there will be wars and rumours of wars, mother fighting against children. Now this is the time, and in that time you will hear about God, too, and then God will return during that time. So when we tell the man, 'See God deh', it's just like a man can say, 'See the nuclear plant'. Y'know what I mean? Because this is prophecy fulfilling. So when I say, 'There is God', and him can say, 'There is the nuclear plant'.

'There is Jerusalem'. There is Ethiopia'. I mean, everything is real, God is real. God is not no spirit, mahn. (Laughs)

*How does Rasta fight back?*

Because Christ is coming and, no, what Rasta deal with is something heavier than fighting back. Most of the people who is fighting and killing off themselves, not one of them's a Rastafari. All the people who's suffering upon the earth, the majority of them, not one of them's a Rastafari. Now we are telling the suffering masses of the world that their redemption is Rastafari and if them don't deal with Rastafari, the suffering will never stop, because there is where the confusion come in, because the people don't deal with Rastafari. There is always a war and fighting and vex and rumours and pressure, even the little small amount of Rastas, so if them don't know Rasta, every day is Judgment. Every day is Judgment, trials and tribulations and crosses and obstacles. So when them move with Rastafari, because Christ promised to mankind that when he returned, he would return in a new name. So Him always speak the truth, yet plenty people never believe that Him speak the truth, but him always speak the truth, so when him come this time, him did not come as Jesus Christ. Him come as Rastafari, through the lineage of King Solomon and King David as the King of Kings, Lord of Lords, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. Everything is real, y'know, but we are not vex with man. We Rasta are not vex with mankind, we have great sympathy upon them, knowing that they did not get this teaching in school. So now that we know the truth that's why God sent us out into the earth, to make every ears hear, because every man is doing his work and every man work is important 'cause whether it is a good work Rasta or whether it is a bad work Rasta, as long as it's a Rasta because Rasta itself is something so positive that no negativity can't manifest around it. So if somebody even say something bad about Rasta, the people don't remember the bad thing, 'cause Rastafari stand prominent.

*If you had a message for the world, what would it be?*

If I had a message for the world, mahn, I would tell the world, 'Don't panic, it's gonna happen'.

*What's gonna happen?*

(Laughs) Everybody know. I tell them. 'Don't panic. Don't panic, people. It's going to happen. Just hold tight'

*And leave them to worry about what's going to happen?*

The people know what is going to happen.

*Are you sure the people know?*

Of course. And remember, the voice of the people is the voice of God, so if you sit down and don't unite yourself together, then all you will be is just victims of this corrupted world.

This interview took place on 18 June 1980.

#### NOTES

1. Part One of 'Ras Culture (For Big Youth)' from Linton Kwesi Johnson's volume of poetry, *Dread Beat and Blood* (London, 1977), p. 57.
2. 'Get Up, Stand Up', Bob Marley and the Wailers LP *Burnin'*, 1973.
3. 'Ambush in the Night', Bob Marley and the Wailers LP *Survival*, 1975.
4. Cathy McKnight and John Tobler, *Bob Marley: the Roots of Reggae* (London, 1977), p. 33.
5. Inez K. Sibley, *Quashie's Reflections in Jamaican Creole* (Kingston, 1968), p. 10.
6. Carl Gayle, *Jah Uganman* (Kingston, 1978), p. 4.
7. 'Redemption Song', Bob Marley and the Wailers LP *Uprising*, 1980.



Bob Marley.

## Carnival of Psyche: Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Myth, as I use it in this context, implies a force in the universe that is untamed and untamable, but which subsists on paradox. Myth teaches us that sovereign gods and sovereign institutions are partial, partial in the sense that they are biased, but when they begin to penetrate their biases, they also begin to transform their fear of the other, of others, of other parts, in a larger complex of wholeness. In this medium of transformation, the unconscious psyche is in dialogue — in rich marvellous dialogue — with the conscious mind. And out of this arises the living ongoing momentum of the imaginative arts.

Now, the basic thrust of what I have to say in this talk has to do with myths that have secreted themselves in certain works of the imagination — I shall confine myself on this occasion to Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*<sup>1</sup> — and of which the writers themselves are or were unaware. But before moving into that territory I think I should make a distinction. It is this: the imaginative artist who makes *deliberate* use of myth may in no way be inferior to the writer or painter or sculptor or composer in whose work one may find an *intuitive* body (or intuitive bodies) of myth.

Writers as varied as James Joyce, St John Perse, Miguel Asturias, David Jones, T.S. Eliot, Camara Laye, Ralph Ellison, Djuna Barnes, D.H. Lawrence, Pablo Neruda, Kathleen Raine — to give outstanding examples — have employed myth with deliberation, but in order to ask new questions, so to speak, of untamable reality. Yet even here — however self-conscious the equilibrium between artist and myth — unconscious variables secrete themselves in the live tapestry of word and image whose enigmatic manifestation lies in the future.

I find myself in agreement with critics and historians of the arts — such as Anton Ehrenzweig, Herbert Read, William James — who point to variables of unconscious motivation in the arts of which generations become differently aware, consciously and partially aware, with the

passage of time. Compositions of music, painting, fiction of a certain kind, sculpture, poetry, will address us differently with the passage of time because of unconscious variables of myth that leave apparent gaps, angularities, turbulences, opacities, in the live tapestry in which they function. Those gaps come to be curiously filled, opacities dazzle or lighten, angularities and turbulences become rich and intriguing, as if the life of works of art mutates in depth with changed perceptions and responses of later decades and generations.

Thus even the self-conscious usage of myth by individual imaginations involves a descent into unconscious variables whose manifestation affects the future. One of the novels I am teaching is Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and you will find there that the Cyclopean giant Polyphemus possesses several hidden and manifest partial signatures. In one partial signature invisible man wears the Cyclopean mask himself in the corrupt boxing ring of history; on another occasion, the Cyclopean giant appears as a doctor in a hospital with a burning eye in his forehead with which he peers into the strange coffin in which Ellison's nameless black Odysseus lies. (It is fitting Homeric as well as Ananay paradox that Odysseus trails the shadow of no one or nobody with which to confuse the Cyclops, the shadow of no name or namelessness with which to confound the Cyclops.) Another significant partial signature of dread Cyclops is written into 'communist' Brother Jack in Harlem politics. New questions are being asked by *Invisible Man* of Homeric myth to mirror the hypocrisies and brutalities of feud in the sports — or boxing — arena, the sinister brain operations in medical theatre, the castrations of psyche in politics of ideology.

What is intriguing about *intuitive* usage of myth — and this is the primary substance of this talk — is that the artist may not perceive in his or her own work an activity or concentration which is other than daylight consciousness and which runs into the apparently unconscious past.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* varies the rainbow arc between cultures in profoundly intuitive spirit. To appreciate that variation we need to recall the bridge between sky and earth that is implicit in the rainbow arc from Central to South America in Quetzalcoatl (snake and bird) and Yurokon (Quetzalcoatl's Carib cousin). Then we need to revise that arc or bridge into a rather different compression of features. The foodbearing tree of the world, in Arawak and Macusi legends, reaches to heaven across forgotten ages, but suddenly we become aware of it as creation myth rooted in catastrophe. The tree is fired by the Caribs at a time of war when the Arawaks seek refuge in its branches. The fire rages and drives

the Arawaks up into space until they are themselves burnt and converted into sparks which continue to rise into the sky to become the Pleiades.

Let us note, firstly, the fire-motif in the creation myth, secondly, the ground of war and catastrophe in which the foodbearing tree is rooted, thirdly, the constellation of the Arawaks in 'the sky of fiction' (if I may so put it). All these features are intuitively woven into the tapestry of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. There is the persistent fire-motif that runs through the entire fabric of the novel. There are the legacies of slavery and catastrophe in the soil of the Caribbean which leave such deep scars on Antoinette and her relations. There is the re-dress of mad Bertha into the new burning constellation of Antoinette in the sky of fiction. Antoinette turns round and sees 'the sky — the tree of life in flames'. 'It was red and all my life was in it' (p. 155).

Mad Bertha of *Jane Eyre* is symbolically, if not literally, widowed by a husband to all intents and purposes dead and vanished. His presence is the presence of ornament and Jean Rhys straitjackets his 'death' into 'stone' (p. 94) in Antoinette's confession to her black Haitian nurse Christophine, as events begin to move towards their separation — Christophine is soon to be banished from Rochester's West Indian household as an evil witch or obeah woman — Antoinette is soon to live the 'lie' of a voyage from the West Indies and the setting up of home in England where she is deemed mad by Rochester and locked away in Thornfield Hall. Antoinette tells Christophine — as she pleads with her to mix a love potion to bring Rochester back to her bed — 'I hear him every night walking up and down the veranda. Up and down. When he passes my door he says, "Goodnight, Bertha." He never calls me Antoinette now. And I dream ... *Then I beat my fist on a stone* ... Going away to Martinique or England or anywhere else, that is the lie' (pp. 93-4, italics mine).

The stone-masked Rochester is an ambiguous yet shrewd alteration by Jean Rhys of the stature — the almost Gothic stature — of Charlotte Brontë's creation. Carnival stone or death-in-life mask expressly mourns a hunger for the dance of life endangered in hunter and hunted, seen and perceived with such intensity by Antoinette *alone in all the world*, so to speak, that she begins to redeem the solitary plague of madness in herself which — in Jean Rhys's ambiguous novel — is nothing but the magic of faith in the subsistence of fiery love to redeem the terrors of the dance when the dance is conscripted into fraud and war. The fire of the war-dance-motif in the foodbearing tree casts its shadow of anguish and pain into Antoinette's plea to Christophine for a desperate love potion to



bring the enemy (yet lover) in Rochester to heel).

Rochester's stone-mask appears to remain pitiless but it is now *psychically* affected by the creature he hunts into madness, the creature to whom he 'dies' after the honeymoon rape she endures. His symbolic conquest of her, yet 'death', his Anglo-Saxon stoicism, is now all at once altered by her uncompromising madness and perception of *his* needs in *hers*. Nothing — neither duty nor respectability nor the observance of codes of behaviour so formidably constructed into moral imperative in *Jane Eyre* — possesses quite the tone of necessity — that runs deeper than appearance and logic — with which Jean Rhys imbues Antoinette, and in so doing makes her madness essentially human, and Rochester's hard-hearted sanity a psychological debt to her inimitable passion that borders on precarious divinity. Hard-hearted sanity it is in him because it remains unconscious of the debt he owes to her that is infinitely greater than the rich dowry, in money terms, she brings to him.

It is this altered substance of indebtedness that leads one to perceive the *psychical and immaterial* re-marriage of Rochester and re-dressed Bertha into Antoinette in the 'sky of fiction'. In saying that it is clear that one cannot avoid the ambiguities that pull at that constellation and suppress it still into the sphere of symbolic widowhood on which we have already commented. These ambiguities are profound and need to be examined in order to keep ourselves subtly attuned to an arbitrating conscience between symbolic widowhood (entrenched in Antoinette's West Indian fortune that leaves her husband sated and deprived) and psychical honeymoon (woven into an ecstasy of hunger one cannot buy or sell).

I have spoken of Rochester's indebtedness to Antoinette but she too is indebted to shadowy, almost nameless, myths within the inarticulate heterogeneity of the Caribbean. May I pause for a moment to explain, in some degree, what I mean by 'inarticulate'. There is no short-cut into the evolution of new or original novel-form susceptible to, immersed in, the heterogeneity of the modern world. If we genuinely accept the view of variables of unconsciousness a handful of eminent thinkers has advanced, it will assist us, I think, to realize that the evolution of complex imagery secretes such variables of or from necessity, and that that secretion may sustain a wealth of beauty when it is perceived in its 'true' light by different eyes in other places or by other generations. That is the price of originality. Mere academic lip-service to creativity is useless whatever its militancy or piety or apparent clarity. Jean Rhys's significance, in 'inarticulate' Caribbean complex, lies in the immaterial, subtly

visible, pressure to alter the rock-fast nineteenth-century convention Rochester symbolizes. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is written in nineteenth-century realist convention and as a consequence the subtle, ambiguous, poignant, disruptions of homogeneous cultural model may be misunderstood or misconceived as the logic of pathos, as a psychology of pathos, whereas their significance, as dialogue with untamable creation myth, is much more profound in their potential bearing on the evolution or original Caribbean or South American novel form.

We have already looked at the Arawak/Macusi foodbearing tree in which is secreted both physical need or hunger and a hunger for creation or renewed visions of creation. We need also to remember Jean Rhys's Anglo-Saxon yet Caribbean antecedents (she was born of a Welsh father and a white *creole* mother in the West Indies). Her imaginative insights are 'white' and 'black' in tone in their appeal to the catholicity of West Indians in whom are combined primitive religions – such as Haitian vodun myth (or obeah) – and fertile Christianity. Obeah is a pejorative term but it reflects significantly a state of mind or embarrassment in both black and white West Indians, a conviction of necessary magic, necessary hell-fire or purgatory through which to re-enter 'lost' origins, 'lost' heavens, 'lost' divinity.

It is Christophine, in particular, Antoinette's Haitian nurse, who symbolizes the forbidden obeah strain in Jean Rhys's imagination. It is she (Christophine) who mixes the love-potion for Rochester which Antoinette cries for, when Rochester finds himself torn by rumours of madness in her family and steels himself (or relapses into his ingrained Protestant rationality and fear of heretical ecstasy) to 'widow' or abandon her like a dead man, however formally alive, as he paces the verandah.

In strict Catholic context (in contradistinction to alchemy and catholicity of origins) we need to glance at the convent in which Antoinette spent an impressionable period after her home was set on fire by angry ex-slaves, a fire that precipitated a massive nervous breakdown in her mother Annette (also known as Bertha) and occasioned the death of Pierre, the youngest member of the family. It is here, in the convent, that we begin to perceive the depth of subversion or ecstatic hunger which begins to envelop Antoinette, to prepare her, so to speak, to become the bride of a spiritual obeah bull. (It may be intuitive design but no accident, I believe, that during the physical and doomed honeymoon between rock-fast Rochester and subversive Antoinette, before he abandons her and widows her on the marriage-bed, he is given a cup of 'bull's blood' by Christophine (p. 71) as a token of his conversion

yet retreat into 'stone' or 'relic' of ecstasy. Thus one of the portents of *psychical* alteration or stone mask or death mask is the obscene bull Rochester unconsciously wears or consumes. All this is so subtly woven into the tapestry of the fiction, it is never explicit, never stated, but lurks, so to speak, between the images in the alchemy of the word.)

It is in the convent that Antoinette is drawn into contemplation of the elusive life of precarious divinity in 'relics' (p. 45) as if in anticipation of the 'relic' of 'stone' Rochester wears after his symbolic death, a relic that undergoes *immaterial* re-animation in the 'sky of fiction' above 'the tree of life in flames' (p. 155).

The 'tree of life' appears in the convent and bears 'a rose from the garden of my Spouse' (p. 45). It is a rose saturated with indebtedness to the black soil of dreams in which Antoinette seeks 'to hold up (her) dress, it trails in the dirt, my beautiful dress' (p. 50). The dream continues:

We are no longer in the forest but in an enclosed garden — I stumble over my dress and cannot get up — I touch a tree and my arms hold on to it. 'Here, here.' But I think I will not go any further. The tree sways and jerks as if it is trying to throw me off. Still I cling and the seconds pass and each one is a thousand years. 'Here, in here', a strange voice said, and the tree stopped swaying and jerking (p. 50)

Antoinette's indebtedness to 'rose of my Spouse' and to 'soil of dreams' is a preparation for a dialogue with the 'other' in the garden, the strange dark terrifying voice she never forgets within her and without her. It is a voice that celebrates and mourns her coming betrothal and marriage. For it is less Rochester and more symbolically herself who drinks 'the cup of bull's blood' which Christophine gives to her insensible bridegroom. It is a voice that pushes her beyond the walls of convent or school in which she shelters. In the darkness of that voice the nuns in the school have 'cheerful faces' she resents (p. 50). They do not understand her magical 'spouse'. They do not perceive a richer catholicity beneath the formal Catholic education they dispense. Their religion — however evocative in its relics — has become respectable ritual, undemanding ornament, as undemanding or frozen in posture as the Greek or Roman goddess of the milky way from whose breasts the white fluid spurts across the sky into the calloused mouth of a consumer age.

Whereas the 'bull's blood' of art and religion is imagistic confession of cross-cultural labyrinth in which the transformation of apparently incorrigible bias in all mankind tests and challenges the imagination beyond ideal formula. It is the stigma of complex earthiness and exile from convention. It is raised with anguish into the stars. The incompati-

bility of consumer callouses and bull's blood holds out madness (if one is enmeshed in a religion of sensuality and mindless academic spirituality) or alternatively it holds out a genuine spiritual sensation that one needs to lose one's ritual soul to find life, and that this means prayer of such depth it is directed to god, however masked by innumerable or magical relics; Antoinette's madness is no less than a hidden surrender of life, a loss of soul to find soul, disrupted ritual callous, disrupted voice of convention in order to find (or begin to find) the voice in the foodbearing tree from the 'spouse' of otherness.

These considerations are never explicitly stated in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Their authenticity lies, I find, in a measure of confused force and anguish that drives her to say to one of the nuns before she leaves the convent: 'I dreamed I was in Hell.' The nun replies: 'That dream is evil. Put it from your mind — never think of it again' (p. 51).

But she was to dream and think of it again and again. And the nun's incomprehension is woven into Bertha's shroud and damnation. It was Jean Rhys's passion to illumine by fire Antoinette's essential humanity and precarious divinity.

I would like to say a brief word, before closing, about the implications that reside, I believe, at the heart of a revised novel-form genuinely susceptible to an evolution of images from within the heterogeneous womb of space in the modern world.

The emphasis in traditional comedy of manners novel sprung from homogeneous cultural models is *structuralist* in tone. Structuralist thinkers have, in various ways, stressed the deception which cultures play on themselves in articulating static gestalt that they cling to as total model. It becomes necessary therefore — in those who become aware of institutional partiality — to descend beneath the 'surface mind' of a culture into other *structures* that alter emphases upon vague and elusive formations suppressed by static gestalt institution. What is striking about such ego corrective descent — however brilliant in its analysis of background and altered foreground features — is its commitment still to *structure* though much less static, much more demanding in depth, than surface mind gestalt; and because of this I find myself *not convinced* that descending structure (or for that matter ascending structure) is the profoundly revisionary strategy of perception it seems. Except that a paradox ingrains itself into descending structure. That paradox is the arousal of 'archaic' elements in depth which are nevertheless attuned to a sensation of comprehension of different times (past, present and future)

built into mobile structures beneath the surface mind. The paradox, however, tends to be stultified — I must emphasize — by the conviction of determined structure or system still which — in its very nature — would imply that one is left with no philosophical alternative but to build upon expectations of sovereign and ruling model in the heights or in the depths. An addiction to absolute power-politics is unsurprising in this philosophical context. Equally unsurprising, in a structuralist world society, is the escalation of violence from ego-fixated, fascist, left wing and right wing parties, and the immense danger to democracies whose consumer-orientation, geared by and large to the lowest common denominator in the market-place, makes them vulnerable prey in time of economic crisis.

What is less clear, I think, in all this, is the advance that nihilism makes in the West and in the so-called Third World; nihilism subsists on the *structuralization of feud* or incorrigible bias at the heart of existence.

What we can salvage from structuralism at its best, I think, is the descent it encourages the serious arts to make into 'inarticulate' layers of community beneath static systems whose 'articulacy' is biased. The 'inarticulate' layers may be equated with variables of the unconscious — as I have already implied — in which myth is untamable force or *unstructured* mediation between partial systems high and low. This is a view, I must confess, that runs counter to the tide of structuralism which ranges from Freudians to Levi-Straussians. Yet it (I mean unstructured mediation or untamable force) may be consistent with recent discoveries in science — enigmatic black hole, ungraspable neutron, quark etc. etc — in which the term 'force' seems closer to reality, to ungraspable quantum leap, than 'structured and sovereign model'.

The distinction is a far-reaching one, to put it mildly. For within a conception of unstructured force that mediates ceaselessly, ungraspably, between inevitably biased or partial systems (wherever these occur in layers of cultural space) variables of the unconscious are less rooted in gaps, opacities etc., and more in the mysterious arbitration of untamable cosmos between institutions, man-made and nature-made, whose hubris of total model cannot be maintained in the light of truth.

Partial institutions or models may learn to yield to creative disruption and to evolutions of capacity that transform catastrophe or they may collapse into the chaos of blind regeneration and impose a fearful price upon those who dwell insensibly in their depths.

It seems clear to me that a narrative fiction which is immersed in these challenges begins, of necessity, to alter the 'commonsense realism' of the

novel in a world where the humanities are losing a complex faith in imaginative truth.

#### NOTES

1. Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, first published 1966. All page references are to the Penguin edition and given in the text.

# Book Reviews

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Michael Thelwell, *The Harder They Come*. Pluto Press, 1980. 399 pages. Cased £6.95, paper £2.95.

The readers of the Pluto Press, specialists in critical and analytical works gathered around the loose theme of the Black Struggle, were so impressed by Michael Thelwell's first novel that they were moved to break their strict 'No novels' rule in order to make *The Harder They Come* available outside the United States, where it is published by Grove Press. This immaculately wrought evocation of life in the insular ghettos of Kingston, Jamaica more than justifies their enthusiasm.

Michael Thelwell, a student activist in Mississippi in the 60s, is the author of numerous short stories and political essays. He currently teaches third world literature in the Department of Afro-American studies, University of Massachusetts. *The Harder They Come* is based on Trevor Rhone and Perry Henzell's script for the film of the same name, released in 1971. The film, Jamaica's first full-length motion picture, was a powerful imaginative reworking of the legend of Rhygin (Rhygin = Raging), roostered gunman and songwriter in Kingston in the 1950s. But it should be emphasized that Thelwell's work is not an exploitative 'novelization' in the currently popular Hollywood style, where necessary descriptive passages are added to film dialogue: 'While strictly adhering to the film's general vision of the meaning of the event, I have added much historical and political detail which, because of the inherent limitations of the medium, was beyond the scope of the film.' (Author's Preface.)

The novel follows Ivanhoe Martin from his childhood in the closeknit mountain village community of Blue Bay through his initiation into the hardships of urban ghetto life where he is confronted with the choice between starvation, humiliation and crime to his early demise as a ghetto legend and outlaw on the run.

The early chapters form a loving, lavishly detailed rendering of life in rural Jamaica, more effective and convincing than the African section in Alex Haley's *Roots*, and in its own quiet way this section of the novel is a scathing critique of the dehumanizing effects of urbanization and industrialization. When Ivanhoe visits Blue Bay after six years in Kingston only to find it a tourist haven, he suddenly understands why 'you no come from nowhere' is the foulest insult one Jamaican can say to another.

This realization along with a nascent social consciousness and political awareness become Ivanhoe Martin's undoing. Frustrated by his lack of options and unable to comprehend the deeper source of that frustration, he turns to a life of crime in the most lurid Hollywood gangster/cowboy style, toting a matched pair of 38 calibre revolvers with mother-of-pearl handles and sneaking into a photographer's studio to pose for pictures to be sent to the press.

One of the novel's greatest strengths is its seamless integration of social commentary

and dramatic narrative. Thelwell has an unfailing gift for the telling detail which enables him to summarise and analyse without halting the flow of the narrative. One small example must suffice. On the increasing black consciousness of the urban ghetto youth and the pervasive influence of the Rastafari religion Thelwell observes:

Most of the youths coming up were growing the locks and taking African names. Ras Dis and Bongo Don, talking about I man dis an, I man the other, everything was dread' and it was bare 'Jah dis an' Jah de next'. The movies were still a great part of their scene, but now they shoured for the Indians and never took the white man's side, much less his name. (p. 205)

Since H. Orlando Patterson's flawed *Children of Sisyphus* in 1964, little of real literary merit on the lowest strata of Jamaican society has appeared. *The Harder They Come* steps boldly into that vacuum, an immensely readable, intense, passionate story full of ironic and low comedy, full of truth and moral outrage, filled with the richness and unselfconscious 'exoticness' that is Jamaica. Read it and weep. Read it and laugh. Read it and think.

ALBERT L. JONES

## APROPOS OF JEAN RHYNS

Louis James, *Jean Rhys*. London: Longman (Critical Studies of Caribbean Writers), 1978. 74 pages. £3.50.

Thomas F. Staley, *Jean Rhys: A Critical Study*. London: Macmillan, 1979, 154 pages, £10; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979, 140 pages, \$11.95.

Jean Rhys, *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1979, 173 pages, £4.95; New York: Harper & Row, 151 pages, \$10.95.

Jean Rhys has recently been reclassified as a West Indian novelist and the appearance of her Dominican autobiography in London last November supports the reclassification. As Rhys readers know, her slim novels published during the nineteen twenties and thirties were long neglected, largely due to the lack of a suitable perspective from which to view them. Francis Wyndham explains their difficulty of placement quite simply: 'they were



ahead of their age, both in spirit and in style'.<sup>1</sup> V.S. Naipaul suggests that the curious failure of *Quarrel*, *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, *Voyage in the Dark*, and *Good Morning, Midnight* to fit into post-modernist critical categories is a function of the writer's West Indian birth and orientation. He says, 'Jean Rhys didn't explain herself. She might have been a riddle to others, but she never sought to make her experience more accessible by making it what it was not'.<sup>2</sup> And Jonathan Raban claims it is 'her West Indian background (that) has helped to exile her from the fatal knowingness that goes with being English'.<sup>3</sup> Now that the sophistication of West Indian literature has been acknowledged beyond an audience of Commonwealth Literature scholars and Jean Rhys has been identified as a West Indian writer, Rhys critics relate her fiction to her West Indian birth, youth and heritage. This approach is currently expressed in two short critical studies — one from England and one from the United States.

Louis James is the author of a Jean Rhys study for the Longmans series entitled 'Critical studies of Caribbean writers'. James established himself as a commentator on West Indian literature when he edited in 1968 a collection of essays by West Indian novelists and critics, *The Island in Between*. That collection did not include an essay on Jean Rhys, but James has now caught up with Rhys' identification as a West Indian writer in his study devoted exclusively to her biography and fiction. He anticipated the book's publication in a July 1977 *Arise* essay 'Sun Fire — Painted Fire: Jean Rhys as a Caribbean Novelist'. In some ways, the essay is superior to the longer effort. It represents a distillation of the best aspects of the book, concentrating on Rhys' 'favourite' novel, *Voyage in the Dark*. The essay reveals James' effort to secure biographic material not ordinarily available on Rhys. He journeyed to Dominica, Rhys' Windward Island birthplace, and there examined archives in Roseau documenting Rhys' great-grandfather's settlement in Dominica. As the Dominican archives have suffered almost total destruction since James' visit because the Court House was burned out in June 1979 during the events leading to the deposition of Patrick John as Prime Minister,<sup>4</sup> this part of James' work is genuinely valuable.

In addition, James interviewed Rhys herself, but this segment of James' research appears to have been less fruitful because there really isn't much new information resulting from his visit with Rhys revealed in either the essay or the book. Perhaps the most useful insight James contributes is that the historic background of *Wide Sargasso Sea* relates to the burning of Rhys' great-grandparents' plantation house by West Indian blacks in 1844. This is particularly fascinating material because, hitherto, many Rhys critics believed that *Wide Sargasso Sea* represented a radical departure from the usual autobiographic approach Rhys used for her four earlier novels. A recognition that the imaginative reconstruction of the burning of Coulibri is not simply a background device for a rewriting of *Jane Eyre* places Rhys squarely into the central tradition of West Indian fiction which is engaged in a new writing of West Indian history. While not autobiographic, *Wide Sargasso Sea* incorporates personal family history not unlike V.S. Naipaul's use of his father's biography for *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

In view of the considerable effort that James expended to collect background information for *Jean Rhys*, it is more-than-disappointing to locate careless and serious errors in the book. Most embarrassing to James must be his extended discussion of Rhys' first husband's identity and role. Commonplace biographic sourcebooks — such as *Contemporary Authors*, for example — could have supplied James with the accurate information that Rhys' first husband was Jean Langlet (later corrected to Jean Lenglet) and not Max Hamer, who was her third husband. James' confusion of Hamer with Lenglet could cause

irreparable error in firming the biographic facts for such an elusive figure as Rhys, especially since James is accepted as an authority on both Rhys and West Indian literature. This sort of factual error first appears in the 'Acknowledgements and Dedication' wherein James justly dedicates his book to Dominican novelist Phyllis Allfrey 'who has given so much to West Indian life and literature'. In listing his appreciations, James names Allfrey's husband as 'Charles' whereas, in fact, he is 'Robert'. This careless error jars confidence in James' reporting accuracy, but his critical accuracy is also placed in jeopardy by such a blatant misreading of *Good Morning, Midnight* as he displays on page twenty-nine. Here he cites the conclusion of the novel in terms of Sasha Jensen's wish that the gigolo return to her instead of in terms of the novel's actual ending — Sasha opens her eyes to find the sinister white-robed tenant of the room next door standing over her.

The biographic urge that sent James to Dominica reveals itself throughout his short book to the detriment of its critical function. The opening chapter, 'The girl from the island', is most smoothly written and it resonates with James' impressions of and responses to the island's singular beauty. The second chapter, 'The European', continues the biographic treatment, but the material is extracted from the early Rhys novels and the research method drifts into the manner of an historic novel. 'When the boat docked at Southampton, it was a grey, lowering English summer. The trees were drab, and the fields from the boat train seemed small and colourless.' This sort of conjectural entry into Rhys' mind has little scholarly support beyond a persistent reliance upon the novels themselves, and although James would protect himself by asserting 'it is particularly important not to confuse fiction and real life', he gingerly treads an unclear route between fiction and biography. He never actually says that Rhys' heroines represent Rhys, but he invokes the chronology of their lives to suggest the continuation of Rhys' own biography. All this leads up to the central chapter on *Wide Sargasso Sea* where one assumes the biographic impulse will be transformed into the critical study promised by the series' title.

Returning to his own vivid impressions of Dominica and to more fascinating details from the island's history, James sets his study of *Wide Sargasso Sea* into a matrix of the novel's derived Dominican background. After a lengthy comparison with *Jane Eyre*, James finally concentrates on *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but the text is so heavily larded with quotations from the novel plus a recounting of story episodes that little space remains for rigorous analysis. James does broach a discussion of Antoinette's divided personality which promises the sort of probing that the novel merits, but he turns quickly to comparing Rochester with Othello. The chapter on *Wide Sargasso Sea* characterizes *Jean Rhys* as a whole. While the book displays flashes of James' critical acumen, it is a disappointing study, lacking the depth of analysis for which James has elsewhere proven himself capable.

The trans-Atlantic race to publish the first work on Rhys also produced Thomas F. Staley's *Jean Rhys*. Staley admits, 'I wrote this book with the idea that it would be the first full-length study of Jean Rhys and her work to be published'. Like James, Staley begins with a biographic study of his subject, but instead of treating biographic material as background for Rhys' fiction, Staley places it in the foreground. And like James, Staley recognizes the formative influence of Rhys' Dominican heritage:

Leaving aside the problematic relationship between life and art, it became clear to me from the first reading of her work that her background and culture not only set Rhys apart from her contemporary novelists, but also shaped a widely different sensibility and radical consciousness.

James says in his book:

Even in her books written wholly about Europe, the sensibility is not wholly European. Her sensitivity to heat and to cold, to bright colour or the absence of colour, her sense of another life behind the mask of society conventions, were formed in the Antilles.

But Staley's biographic research source took him in a different direction. Rather than combing Dominican records for historic documentation, Staley came from the United States to England where he interviewed Rhys' publisher, her second husband's daughter, and Jean Rhys herself. Curiously, neither James nor Staley interviewed Rhys' own daughter, Marywonne Moorman. Staley's interviews with Rhys were more productive than James' because not only did they furnish specific personal facts about the novelist, they also gained for Staley's university a collection of Rhys correspondence. The correspondence, in turn, gave Staley valuable information about Rhys' life after her expatriation in Paris; consequently, hitherto-unrecorded information about her several marriages appears for the first time in Staley's book. Rhys held back her love letters, however, and the identity of her first lover remains concealed while her relationship with Ford Madox Ford is based, as has become custom, upon Stella Bowen's account in *Drawn from Life* (London, 1941) and Arthur Mizener's biography of Ford, *The Saddest Story* (New York and Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1971).

After the initial chapter of biographic material, Staley launches into a chronological book-by-book examination of Rhys' writing. The critical material occupies a larger proportion of Staley's book than James' but Staley claims that it lacks a central thesis: '...nor have I developed a thesis or confined the study to a singularity of critical or thematic approach...' His explanation is that 'such undertakings as these are left to others'. The usefulness of Staley's decision to avoid the strictures of an imposed thesis appears immediately in his treatment of *The Left Bank*. Free to analyse the overall strengths and failings of the collection of short stories, Staley discusses Rhys' style, her lack of 'clear models or visible influences', and her developing craft. Staley indicates which stories he finds effective ('La Gross Fifi') and which unsuccessful ('Hunger') and the reasons for his judgements. He shows how the open-ended stories are peculiarly Rhysian and how they point to the future direction of Rhys' novels. Staley identifies the stories of *The Left Bank* as apprenticeship writing and then moves on to examine the four novels of Rhys' first phase.

Like James, Staley also published in advance a chapter of his book as an essay. Chapter three on *Quartet* first appeared in the summer of 1978 in the Hofstra University Journal, *Twentieth Century Literature*. This appears to be the only other published instance of Staley's interest in Rhys' work, and his approach is not by way of Commonwealth Literature but rather by way of his specialization in Modern Literature. The essay on *Quartet* — 'The Emergence of a Form: Style and Consciousness in Jean Rhys's *Quartet*' — displays a strong feminist tone which is carried over to Staley's book. It is this feminist emphasis that Gabrielle Antón notes with sarcasm in the *Times Literary Supplement* (21 December 1979). 'He sees us to sense' the feminist school of literary criticism peering behind his sleigh hoping for another Virginia Woolf to drop into the snow' and Hilary Spurling ridicules in *The Observer* as 'clapping about «the female condition»'. In spite of the resistance in England to feminist literary criticism and despite Rhys' disavowal of herself as a feminist writer, there is much feminist material in the Rhys novels and Staley does a competent job of displaying and analyzing it.

As Staley's *Jean Rhys* progresses, it becomes evident that it is not, after all, so lacking in an organizing principle because Staley applies his feminist view beyond the four novels of the twenties and thirties to *Wide Sargasso Sea* and to what he calls 'The Later Writing'. His conclusion transcends his particular critical approach, however, in a recognition that the critical attention consequent to *Wide Sargasso Sea* has produced a collective opinion that Rhys is someone whose 'talent and intelligence encompass dimensions not found elsewhere in the modern English novel'.

*Scale Place* is Jean Rhys' own statement about her influence of her Dominican childhood upon her life and art. Subtitled 'An Unfinished Autobiography', the volume is divided in half by copies of photographs that Diana Athill found among Rhys' papers. The first half is the finished Dominican material and the second half includes somewhat less coherently connected post-Dominican material. In addition, a piece written during Rhys' later life is included at the end. The childhood recollections are written in the crystalline prose that characterizes all Rhys' writing, and nowhere is there any touch of sentimentality. Searching her memory for the earliest possible accurate vignette, Jean Rhys opens the autobiography with a portrait of herself as the age of six. It is regrettable that the photograph described (the title inspiration) did not survive to illustrate the text.

The Rhys reader meets in the flesh, as it were, characters encountered earlier in the fiction: Francine of *Poysa in the Dark* reappears; Aunt Clarice is surely the model for Anna Morgan's stepmother Hester; Christophine's original might well be the obese woman Ann Twiss. The main character is, of course, the island itself, and Rhys renders it with the same subtlety that she used to evoke Paris in her stories of *The Left Bank* and in *Quartet*. Without long descriptive passages, she creates the island's special ambience. Then, in an uncommon burst of affirmation, she explains the growth of her love for the island.

It's strange growing up in a very beautiful place and seeing that it is beautiful. It was alive. I was sure of it.... I wanted to identify myself with it, to lose myself in it.

The earth was like a magnet which pulled me and sometimes I came near it, this identification or annihilation that I longed for. Once, regardless of ants, I lay down and kissed the earth and thought, 'Mine, mine'.

But Rhys' appraisal of her West Indian island home becomes bitter when she recounts her return visit. Trying, in 1938, to locate her mother's family home in the mountains — Geneva (Was her assumed name a reflection of the Lockhart plantation name?) — Rhys was informed that she was now required to hire a guide. After hiring the requisite guide, she discovered Geneva had once again been burnt to the ground. Leaving the site of remembered childhood idylls, she stooped to drink from Geneva River, superstitiously trying to ensure a return visit. But the guide informed her that she mustn't drink from the river because it was now polluted. 'Very dirty, not like you remember it.'

Rhys' memories of turn-of-the-century Dominica are not all of an island paradise where it is summer every day of the year. Even as a child, Rhys recognized the undercurrent of strained race relations. Trying to befriend a beautiful coloured student at her convent school in Roseau, Gwen Williams was rebuffed and she credited the rebuff to racial jealousy. The pain of the rebuff was remembered all Jean Rhys' life, and it emerges fictionally in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as the rock Tia throws at Antoinette's face. Nevertheless, it is of Tia that Antoinette last dreams before setting fire to Thornfield Hall, and it is Tia's summons that Antoinette follows to her death. Jean Rhys was never able to resolve her

ambivalence about racial identity; even in one of her late conversations with David Plante, she claimed the possibility of African blood by way of her maternal great-grandmother from Cuba: 'Where else would I get my love for pretty clothes?'<sup>2</sup> Young Gwen Williams passionately wished to be black; Jean Rhys' Anna Morgan wishes to be black; Jean Rhys, writing an autobiography in her eighties, still marvelled that the whites of Dominica were hated: 'They hate us. We are hated. Not possible. Yes it is possible and it is so.'

With Rhys' death and the posthumous appearance of her autobiography, the new critical trend of recognizing her as a West Indian novelist and of lauding her exceptional style takes its first turn. As Rhys herself might have predicted, the turn toward devaluation has been initiated by a woman. Diana Trilling in her *New York Times* review of *Soul Place*. Essayist Trilling calls the book 'markedly disappointing' and 'deficient', and complains that she really learns nothing more about Rhys' life from her autobiography than she had already learned from her novels. Trilling supports her judgement by an extraordinary comparison of Rhys' writing with that of Ernest Hemingway and of Rhys' acting with that of Marilyn Monroe. Trilling's disappointed curiosity is, however, satisfied by David Plante's intimate revelations about his personal role in aiding Rhys with the writing of *Soul Place*. Plante, who never surfaced during Rhys' lifetime, is now providing with 'urgency and honesty' (according to Trilling) to the readers of the *Manchester Guardian* and *Paris Review* such details of Rhys' later life that do not appear in the autobiography: how he fished her out of the toilet where she had become stuck, how she spent winters drinking in a hotel in London while he typed her manuscript. Plante, identified by Trilling as 'a young American novelist who lives in London', will do well to write a novel which approaches the quality of one of Rhys', and Trilling might do better than repeat the patronizing stance she found successful in her earlier Marilyn Monroe essay.<sup>3</sup> *Soul Place* will doubtlessly outlive the essays of Diana Trilling and the novels of David Plante. More importantly, the novels by its author will prevail over all the critical studies, personal essays and book reviews exploiting them.

ELAINE CAMPBELL

# NOTES

1. Francis Wyndham, 'Introduction', *Wide Sargasso Sea* (New York: Popular Library, 1966), p. 10.
2. V.S. Naipaul, 'Without a Dog's Chance', *The New York Review of Books*, 18 May 1972, p. 29.
3. Jonathan Raban, 'Exiles', *Encounter*, June 1975, p. 81.
4. See *The Star* (Rogou, Dominica), 23 June 1979, p. 2.
5. David Plante, 'Big Tree, Falling', *Guardian Weekend*, 10 November 1979, p. 11.
6. I wish to thank Edith Larson, my colleague at Brandeis University, for pointing out the similarity between Trilling's review of *Soul Place* and her essay on Marilyn Monroe: 'The Odd Career of Jean Rhys', *New York Times Book Review*, 25 May 1980, and 'The Death of Marilyn Monroe', *Redbook*, February 1963.

Dick Harrison, ed. *Crossing Frontiers Papers in American and Canadian Western Literature*. The University of Alberta Press, 1979. 174 pages. \$10.00.

This volume contains papers given at a conference in Banff, Alberta in 1978. The conference was organized by Dick Harrison, the theme was 'Crossing Frontiers', and the aim was to bring together American and Canadian historians, literary scholars and writers who were concerned with the culture of the two Wests. Dick Harrison states that the volume is also designed as an autonomous book that might be useful as a starting point for a comparative study of Canadian and American Western literature. There can be no doubt that it will fulfil this function. Lack of space prevents a detailed review of all the papers, but a brief survey of the papers and the names of the scholars will offer an idea of the breadth and depth of the volume.

The conference was arranged so that particular persons were chosen to respond to each of the papers. The responses are also included in the book. Appropriately enough the introductory essay is by Dick Harrison. The first three papers focus on historical aspects. They are: Don D. Walker, 'On the Supposed Frontier Between History and Fiction' - responder: Delbert Wylder; Howard R. Lamar, 'The Unsettling of the American West: The Mobility of Defeat' - responder: Earl Pomeroy; Lewis G. Thomas, 'Prairie Settlement: Western Responses in History and Fiction, Social Structures in a Canadian Hinterland'. Harrison had intended Carl Berger to respond to Thomas's controversial paper, but unfortunately Berger was ill.

The next three papers are of a literary nature: Robert Kroetsch, 'The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space' - responder: Sandra Djwa; Leslie Fiedler, 'Canada and the Invention of the Western: A Meditation on the other Side of the Border' - responder: Jack Brenner; Eli Mandel, 'The Border League: American «West» and Canadian «Regions»' - responder: W.H. New.

The final section, 'The Summing Up' includes reviews of the conference and excerpts from the talks and discussions that are not included in the previous sections. The contributors to the summing up are Richard E. Enslin, Henry Krieger, Rosemary Sullivan, and Max Westbrook.

Apart from being a historical and literary exploration of the two Wests, their similarities and dissimilarities, the volume is of interest to all historians and literary scholars. The present tendency to include fiction when traditional historical sources have been emptied or are non-existent has led to a re-definition of historical evidence. This tendency is world-wide but must be of particular interest to Western Canada where writers like Rudy Wiebe, Margaret Laurence and Robert Kroetsch have been re-writing Canadian history from an imaginative and creative point of view.

Looking at the volume as a whole it is revealing to see that American scholars seem to be most concerned with the similarities of the two Wests whereas Canadian scholars emphasize the differences. Apart from offering new insights into the historical development of the Canadian West, Lewis G. Thomas, in his description of the relationship between Eastern Canada and the Prairie Provinces, tends to establish new boundaries in Canada itself by using a terminology that includes words like 'colony', 'colonizer' and 'Eastern élite'. This indirect comment upon one of the most urgent domestic problems in present-day Canada means that the book is valuable not only as a basis for a comparative study of the two Wests but also as an up-to-date statement on Western Canada.

JØRN CARLSEN

David Ireland, *A Woman of the Future*. Allen Lane. A\$9.95.

David Ireland has written an awesome allegory for feminism. That's how I found myself reading *A Woman of the Future*, but Alethea Hunt's fragmented account of her development from conception to her final change after High School is part of a large social demonstration and inquiry.

The society is our own. A few clues time Alethea's adolescence about or a bit after 2000 AD, but like other prophets (Blake springs to mind) Ireland testifies to what's here and now, needing only to be envisioned — really seen. Ireland includes some history of civilization in Alethea's education, but invents almost nothing to fill the prospective gap. Then, as now, many people are cool and almost interested witnesses of cruelty. Then, as now, barely controlled sexual permissiveness has people quite fully representing their fears and hypocrisies as well as finer qualities, in their sexual actions. Data checks and computerization are becoming universal among us, as they are for Alethea.

Already we accept the idea of training large numbers of people simply to fill time without loss of face. Alethea reports 'the consumption of time is the chief object of mock-work done by the free'.

'Freedom' is a temptation systematically offered by the state. An achiever, Alethea makes her own assessments. 'Nothing was as they told me.' The end of saying yes is the despicable, pampered existence of suburban hordes, their attitudes and technology kept in running order by those who 'serve' society. To serve, a student must evade but not defy the downward levelling double-talk and double think about equality of talents: you need luck to stay clear of failure, and, if actively intelligent, a sort of highly developed negative capability to bear what you see.

Ireland builds his images of 'failure' on a telling correspondence of two kinds of fear. In 'failed' people, unmonitored mental preoccupations come to light as cancerous process, body growth taking on an undesired autonomy of imitation. Anything that is in you visibly grows, and grows out, like a tumour, like a bullet years after impact. People Alethea knows grow, variously, a coffin, wood, leafy branches, words, coins, cannon, internal organs, and all-over vulva — this last, a figure as obsessive as classical Rumour with her many eyes and tongues. A boy's wish to help emerges in paper napkins, used after sex-parties. Less surprisingly, one child becomes pig-faced, one fragments, another grows into the ground if he stands still, and a girl tends to join us to people she touches. The ambitious are terrified of deformity because it marks those too singularly pre-occupied to be Servers.

Neither of Alethea's parents 'grows' anything. But their acceptable appearance is a blind. Alethea's mother had the child, tended it for six years and since then has poured everything that is in her — on to paper — a shedful of pigeon-holed writings, her lifelong record of her life.

It's a catalogue of much writing of self-assessment. Towards the end, forced to the same device — desperately piling together the papers of her human memorial — Alethea develops compassion for her mother's cut-off state and mechanical statements of love. 'Why didn't I ask more questions? I wish I knew more about her, why she shut herself in. Was there a change neither she nor father told me of?'

I think here of the common ignorance, among younger women, of what the older, silent and even defected, have suffered and achieved.

And Alethea's father? He dies daily on the public concourse in a play entitled 'Changes' which has official support because it promotes satisfaction among the populace. He is in despair; to him the daily stage death and return home prove that nothing can change. Every day as he arrives, he kisses his constantly-writing wife who is indifferent or annoyed. He performs all the house-keeping functions, as well as promoting the development of a superior girl-child, quizzing her on social issues, participating in her activities, giving the example of unblinkered tolerance in a hypocritical and totalitarian society.

He is the outwardly bland once-idealistic liberal, making the best of it and often blind to atrocity. He moves derelict people from a house under the wrecker's ball — but they will be dumped the other side of town. He has grown used to book-burning — a commonplace of *Fahrenheit 451* civic action. He lives passively with the family disaster, the absence of a woman who is physically present.

In his way he is an excellent feminist fellow, but he is a fraud and his prodigy of a daughter is an orphan. He has been called 'a repository of the wisdom of the people'; but it must be partly an indictment. Alethea sees his sophisticated insufficiency, affectionately uses him (as he begs to be used) as pardsick, competitor, and plaything; judges him, and moves on.

It is she, not he, who carried out the intuition of a personal relationship with the land. If he has a life, it is largely through the tremendousness of her learning experiences with and upon him. There is a coldness in the stripping down process of allegory; in his company I can enjoy the contemplation of that other great fraud-as-father, Christina Stead's Sam Pollin, and his cringing, nightmare benevolence. It's the life, the inconsistencies, the undesigned ironic ways in which he feeds the genius of Louie, a messy prodigy who will make out.

The surprise Alethea brings to her world is an undirected desire for greatness, female and personal. Against the rules, she has a sense of beauty; she is capable of great generosity, great play; she sighs after the genius of power and the genius of wisdom. The frankness of her self-examination, the large curiosity which leads her in all directions (from masturbation I turned briefly to history), her efforts at mapping a course (she decides to learn from men's examples because they have been more successful), are all impressive.

Yet at the end Alethea has directed all her enormous energy only to being TOP, beating the others, especially males, analysing the system so as to triumph...

Society cannot place her. For all her wish not to be duped and ravaged, she participates in a world full of these things. She is too big. Doped and pokcraped, she finally knows society's way of dealing with such a freedom as she proposes for the whole of Alethea Hunt.

Once she set by a mountain waterfall and wished for its 'freedom to jump'. Her departure as leopard — a characteristically total and startling change — seems to be a movement away from human society and out to the continent at which Ireland gestures throughout the book, the visionary country of bush and grassland towards which she drives her car with her last human capabilities. Is it also a journey towards a love beyond the rediscovery of a childhood love? At one moment, despoiled, she let herself be watched, piled, and let off the competitive game of 'dare you' which is the basis of her life design so far. Certainly it is a positive journey.

'I thought it was youth I was gradually leaving — it is a life as others know it; that's going? What am I? Will I be able to stay sane?... one's deepest instinct is to go on.



Society's values almost left behind, she wonders if her human life and impending change will be 'a symbol for future females, an archetype for the future'. Somehow, trying to answer this, it matters that she has attracted and perhaps appreciated (by keeping her letters) the caring, country-bred Lil Lutherburrow, put-upon for sex and maternal services, a fool and wise in senses exactly contrary to Alethea.

Ireland's first prize-winning book *The Charnic Bird* deals with the unresolved effects of a dropout to fantasize a family round himself. His *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* showed men swallowed by their creation, the irresponsible monster organization to whom they turn for a livelihood. Here Ireland sends Alethea into an unsocialized and fabulous existence in unknown country, country of the mind, where her marks (accord to a boy in High School finals) cannot follow her, nor her father's offer of a reward. At this crisis and metamorphosis it is no more use talking of madness, as did one reviewer in a wince of disgust, than it is with Theodora Goodman. Ireland's is a dire but bold pronouncement: a curse or a promise — the life that is within us will abandon everything, even the identity of the past, the records and the managers, for the 'freedom to jump'.

JUDITH RODRIGUEZ

Yvonne du Fresne, *Farvel and other Stories*. Victoria University Press and Price Milburn, 1980. \$7.95.

These linked stories are a record of the life of the Danish-French Haguene community in the Manawatu, New Zealand. Yvonne du Fresne is herself a member of that community and the stories are strongly autobiographical. They tell of the struggles of an immigrant community not only to adjust to a new land, and to integrate into an Anglo-Saxon community, but also of their attempts to retain the old traditions of which they were so proud. If these stories are to be believed, and there is no reason why they shouldn't be, their attempt at cultural retention has been extremely successful for the legends, history and customs of Denmark seem to play as much a role in the life of this community in the 1990s-40s as they did in the 1860s when they first settled in New Zealand.

It is presented to us through the eyes of a small child, Astrid Westergaard, who sees herself as a spy, intent on discovering New Zealand which for her was 'a country that was coloured rose pink and an ancient country of the British Empire'. Astrid has a vivid imagination and quite often lives in a fantasy world divided between that of the ancient Vikings and of the British Empire. She can change within minutes from being a Viking queen to one of the Royal Princesses, her playmate Cherry Taylor is the other, playing with the corgis at the Royal Lodge. Much of the humour of these stories, and some are very funny indeed, originates from this gap between the imagined event and the actual reality.

Fader told her the stories of the Old People, The Marsh King Elin-Mouru, the Haldren, Baldur, Thor, Harald Blutooth. Harald Blutooth had lived near them in Jutland, as Jellinge, and had carved his own messages on his rune stones and put it out on the moors, for his messages to be seen by all men of the earth and sky.

But no one had set a rune stone here in a paddock for them to read. There were three messages though. One was a grave message on the petrol pump at the store,

'Do not pump until this glass is full.'

The others were on a stone shed across the road. The front one was an elegant Goshing tin sign – 'Whitkarewa Feed and Grain Co.' and on the back of the shed – 'Fatty Sykes is a Skite' in large, white-washed letters. Aspid envied Fatty Sykes. His friends had made a name score for him, for evermore.

As a social document the stories have much to teach us about a small immigrant community and at such they must be looked upon as Yvonne du Fresnois's loving tribute to that community. But they also fulfil the second requirement Sidney demanded of a literary work – they delight.

ANNA RUTHERFORD

Robert Fraser, *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah: A Study in Polemical Fiction*. Heinemann, London, 1980. 113 pages.

In this work Robert Fraser assesses Armah's contribution to African literature in two areas, as an innovative technician whose experiment with the chronicle form in *Two Thousand Seasons* is an attempt to bring his art to the attention of a wider African public, and as a social critic whose concern with the imaginative sterility of contemporary society in Ghana leads him to seek its causes in the breakdown of social cohesion in the pre-colonial past.

An opening chapter, 'The Context: Liberation and Resistance', is useful in providing a sketch of Armah's background, and an assessment of the contributions which his reading of Fanon and his experiences of black political awareness in the USA in the early 1960s and of the 'post-colonial crisis' in Algeria in 1963 made to Armah's analysis of his society. A discussion of the five novels in chronological order of publication follows.

The first three novels are examined in the light of Fraser's contention that 'despite the tone of individual anguish in his first three books (Armah's) primary concern has been with the cultivation of the collective, rather than the individual sensibility' (page xii). Arguing that critics of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* have been narrow-minded in concentrating on the surface manifestations in the novel of the rot in post-colonial Africa, Fraser draws attention to Armah's examination of the social causes of this rot: the 'useful mitigating factors' (page 12) which, in Fraser's view, indicate a 'compassionate sense of human frailty' (page 15) at work in the novel. In a world which denigrates anything of local manufacture or inspiration, Koormon is recognizably the successor of generations of men who exploited their people in order to get the trifles of the West, but Fraser's assertion that Armah sees historical forces as mitigating factors remains not proven. The discussion of *Fragment* and *Why Are We So Blest?* is valuable in pointing to their examination of the sterility of contemporary African society: in *Fragment* this is a sterility of the imagination as well as a broader social impotence; in *Why Are We So Blest?* sexual sterility is a metaphorical extension of the lack of instinctual life which betrays the hopes of the people and renders Solo an 'ideological neuter' (page 49), incapable of using his art as he wishes to, in the service of the people.

Any discussion of Armah's works must come to terms with his fourth novel, *Two Thousand Seasons*. Fraser's comparison of this novel with Yambo Ouloguem's *Le Dénier de Violence* is interesting in the light it sheds on Armah's reaction to the call for the African artist to provide his readers with an alternative to the colonial view of their

history by, in Chinua Achebe's words, 'showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost'. *The Reader* applies a different historical method, with its closely researched analysis of a crucial period of Ghanaian history, but tends toward the same end.

Fraser sees in Armah's use of the plural voice in *Two Thousand Seasons* an assertion of the traditional relationship of the African artist and his community, in opposition to the alienated, Romantic artist figures of the first three novels. He holds that *Two Thousand Seasons* marks a crucial development in Armah's writing, not only a change in the primary focus of the subject matter, from the anguish of the present to its sources in the past, but a change in style as a result of Armah's concern with the democratic basis of his art as a novelist.

While the author is obviously an admirer of Armah's work, he is not unaware that there are passages, particularly in the two later novels, in which Armah's writing lacks power. He argues, however, that Armah's technical innovations in *Two Thousand Seasons* should be recognized as nothing short of revolutionary. Fraser's emphasis on Armah's concern in all five novels with the historical basis of contemporary human interactions is convincing, and while his discussion indicates Armah's interest in the causes of the disease, he does not ignore the symptoms which are so compellingly depicted in the earlier novels, although he does not pay them the attention which they have received from some of the critics listed in his selective bibliography of secondary sources.

While this brief work is not a definitive study of Armah — how, indeed, can one expect a definitive study of a living writer? — the author's careful examination of Armah's evaluation of the historical forces acting upon a society and his analysis of Armah's developing style form a major addition to the growing body of criticism on the novels of this fascinating writer.

ROSEMARY COLMER

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# Journals

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## THE HUMANITIES REVIEW

*The Humanities Review*, a journal of contemporary ideas published in India and edited by a recent visitor to Australia, Dr Chaman Nahai, is planning an edition devoted to the literature of the South Pacific, with particular reference to Australia.

The review carries a fair amount of creative writing and literary criticism and this forthcoming edition, Vol. II, Nos 3 and 4 (October-December 1980) will include pieces by Frank Moorhouse and Michael Wildgen.

Copies, should you be interested in obtaining them or publicising them, are available from The Managing Editor, *The Humanities Review*, 2/1, Kalkaji Extension, New Delhi 110008. Individual copies: ru. 6 rupees + 5 rupees postage.

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# Conferences

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## KARIBIK – The Caribbean in Bremen, 24-29 July 1980.

'Karibik', 'the Caribbean', was the title of a cultural week held in Bremen from 24 to 29 July 1980, organized by the University in co-operation with the Ethnseumuseum. The rich programme combined an introduction to the history and culture of the West Indies with a critical survey of the problems West Indians living in Britain today have to face. In both cases, the concept of Black identity emerged as the main theme: identity to be developed out of the African as well as the European strands of history; identity to be gained and maintained in the face of social and cultural oppression; identity to be ardently and subtly formed through intellectual, artistic and educational endeavour. An impressive variety of lectures, films, slide shows, theatre and dance performances did justice to the wide scope of the theme. During this week, the much advertised image of the West Indies as the palmfringed, sunsplashed and carefree tropical islands gratefully ready to accommodate any number of tourists was countered by the presentation of the growing culture of peoples struggling to free themselves from suppression and foreign dominance both in the past and in the present.

The groundwork was laid by Edward K. Brathwaite, poet and historian. In his lecture on the history and culture of the Caribbean he argued that the present day fragmentation of the West Indies is not without alternatives. Fragmentation, he said, is not only a geo-physical condition of the archipelago, but also a social and cultural condition. The enforced migration from different African countries, the influx of human beings from other countries, the overlords of different European nations, the ensuing pressures of colour and race, of social stratification and ideology, the dependence on foreign power structures, all these factors were conducive to the present state of ethnic, cultural and political fragmentation. In order to find a solution, one will have to take up the useful traditions from Europe and Africa, one will have to make use of the humanitarian thinking and the industrial development of Europe and at the same time draw on the African kernel of identity, the irreducible core of African man, his cultural and spiritual vitality. Thus there will be an alternative to European domination, thus a new identity is in the process of being created, thus the fragments will be capable of becoming a universe.

I felt that the other contributions illuminated various aspects of Brathwaite's magnificent vision. (My impressions will, of course, of necessity be partial and incomplete.) Ian Hall (Guyana/London), in a vivacious and entertaining lecture, traced musical traditions from their West African origin to popular West Indian music forms like Calypso or Reggae. The London Schools Steel Orchestra and the Trinidad Carnival Club (London) demonstrated to an enthusiastic audience how Blacks in London use their music, their costumes, their dances and their Carnival in order to define themselves in a white society. Derek Walcott's play *Pantomime*, performed by the Black Theatre Group London, took up the topic of white master/black slave (as it is encapsulated in Defoe's *Robinson*).

Friday-relationship) and developed it into a drama of white insufficiency and black self-assertion. The education of Black children in Britain is John Agard's (Guyana/London) present field of activity; with the aid of poetry and folk tales from the West Indies, danced and sung in class, he hopes to convey to the second generation of Blacks in Britain a sense of their African and West Indian roots. Linton Kwesi Johnson (London) contributed Reggae lyrics which relate to the British context. The situation of Blacks in Britain (characterised) by discrimination, youth unemployment and low educational standards, among other things) was further explained not only by Darcus Howe's lecture on the place of Blacks in the English class society, but also by various TV and film productions (as for example from the series 'Empire Road' and the film 'Pressure', to name but two).

The task of defining the situation of West Indians, of giving meaning to their world and of showing possible directions of action, appears largely to be the task of the creative artist. Four major writers were assembled to read and discuss extracts from their work. Wilson Harris (Guyana/London) urged the artist to extend the boundaries of perception. John Agard explained his writings for children. Gil Tucker (Jamaica/Frankfurt) talked about his lyrics in the context of Jamaican Rastafarianism. Edward K. Brathwaite read from his volume 'The Arrivants'.

I hope that I have made it clear that I consider this Caribbean week a highly informative, important and valuable event. It not only provided new and necessary insights into the reality of the lives of West Indians, it also fostered the idea that their struggle for freedom and identity is related to other similar movements in the world, also in this country.

#### JENS-ULRICH DAVIDS

The Welsh Arts Council International Writer's Prize 1980 Conference,  
Gregynog, Newtown, Powys, 17-19 October 1980.

It is not often that the poetry of Wales, the Caribbean and South Africa are discussed together and in relation to each other, even in the context of Commonwealth Literature, so that those who travelled to mid-Wales to attend this Conference, organised by the Welsh Arts Council as part of its programme of events in celebration of the work of Derek Walcott, this year's recipient of the International Writer's Prize, were fortunate indeed to have the opportunity of participating in a debate which was much freer and more immediate in its implications than the stated theme of the Conference, 'The Writer in a Multi-Cultural Society', might have at first glance suggested.

Walcott, who was present for much of the Conference, provided the central focus of the discussions, his work both as playwright and poet in the Caribbean functioning virtually as a paradigm of the Commonwealth writer's search for wholeness and integrity in rendering his own society in terms that both reflect its shattered history and assert its multi-faceted identity. Hearing Walcott reading some of his latest poetry, a humorous dialect poem, a haunting elegy on the death of Jean Rhys, one was aware of the variety of his experience and the continual choices in terms both of language and form the poet has to make.

Kenneth Surin's appraisal of Walcott's radical poetry was inevitably filtered to us through the experience of having already heard the South African Minko Maseko's account of the disparate yet irrevocably linked cultures of his country and the new poetry

that has arisen in the townships since the sixties and the growth of the Black Consciousness movement. In some ways nothing could be further from the measured distance achieved in Walcott's political poems than the strident uncompromising harshness of the poems Mumboe read for us and which Christopher Heywood's searching paper put into a total-historical and intellectual context.

It was left to Ned Thomas to provide a direct link between Walcott and Welsh poetry in the paper with which the Conference concluded. 'The Landscape in the Poet', although what he had to say had in some sense been implicit in the proceedings from the very start. The Welsh poets he introduced were for the most part unknown to the majority of us, but his selection of Waldo Williams's poem 'Pa Beth Yw Dia' conveyed to all of us that sense of a common task, a shared responsibility, that precedes all poetic endeavour and which every writer in whatever society he finds himself has to discover for himself.

What is living? To have a large hall  
Between narrow walls  
...  
What is being a nation? A talent  
In the deepest places of the heart  
What is loving your country? Keeping house  
In a cloud of witnesses.

MARGARET BUTCHER

#### NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

*John Clenchy*, Australian short story writer; *John Green*, New Zealand short story writer; *Michael Morribury*, New Zealand short story writer and poet; *Judith Rodriguez*, Australian poet, teaches at La Trobe University and is poetry editor of *Meanjin*; *Agha Shahid Ali*, Indian poet; *Robert Kwock*, Canadian novelist and poet; *Anna Rutherford* teaches at Aarhus University and edits *Kunapipi*; *Hana Mies-Jelínek* teaches at the University of Liège; *Howard McNaughton* teaches at University of Canterbury, New Zealand; *Michael Sharkey* teaches at the University of New England, Australia; *Rosemary Collier* teaches at Macquarie University, New South Wales; *James Wileland* teaches at Wollongong University, New South Wales; *Dick Harrison* teaches at University of Alberta, Edmonton; *Albert L. Jones* takes the reggae programme on Danish Radio as well as *Pop Then and Now*; *Wilson Harris*, Guyanese novelist and critic; *Peter Carroll* is an Australian actor; *Bob Marley*, reggae star; *Armand Petré* is a Belgian whose photographs of New Zealand will be one of the exhibits at the New Zealand Arts Festival to be held in Aarhus, 10-17 November; *John de Piner*, Canadian photographer.



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